

Guest Editorial

Islam: a complex faith

Dr Patrick Sookhdeo

The terrorist attack on America's World Trade Centre and the Pentagon on September 11th has given rise to a media debate on Islam. Many commentators (and of course Western world leaders, though firm evidence has yet to be made public) have come to the conviction an Islamic group may be responsible—hence the debate. This editorial is a contribution to the debate on the nature of Islam. We make no assertions whatsoever as to who may have masterminded Tuesday 11th's tragic events, in spite of the finger of accusation pointed at the organisation of Osama bin Laden.

The Muslim prophet Muhammad, the founder of Islam, was a complex character whose attitudes and opinions changed and evolved during his lifetime in response to events around him. It is not surprising to find that Islam is a complex faith, and cannot be pi-

geon-holed as 'peaceful' or 'violent' or under any simple heading.

Condemnation by Muslim leaders

Muslim leaders around the world have condemned the act of terrorism. Many leading public figures in the West have done the same, often going on to express an understanding that Islam is a peaceable faith which could never sanction such actions. It is heart-warming to see such concern for the image, feelings and well-being of the Muslim community worldwide. We echo this concern and particularly the concern for Muslim minorities in the West, who feel themselves very vulnerable to revenge attacks by those who believe Muslims responsible for the World Trade Centre attack. The threats and intimidation that Muslims in the US, UK, Australia and elsewhere have reported since Tuesday

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11th are inexcusable and thoroughly contemptible.

Islamophobia

That 'Islam' means 'peace' we are often told by Muslim and non-Muslim alike. Before Tuesday 11th, British newspapers and television had tended to paint a glowing picture of Islam as a religion of peace, modesty, morality, self-discipline and family values, sadly tainted by the violence of a few 'fundamentalists'. Muslim minorities nevertheless continued to complain of Islamophobia, and felt themselves unjustly portrayed in the media as terrorists to a man.

Submission of non-Muslims to Muslims

The truth lies not so much in the middle between these two extremes of peace and violence, but manages to embrace both extremes at the same time. It is true that many individual Muslims are peace-loving and law-abiding. But it is not true that 'peace' is the main characteristic of faith of Islam. It is not even true that the word 'Islam' means 'peace'. In fact it means 'submission'. ('Peace' and 'submission' come from the same root in Arabic. *Ed.*). Islam as a faith emphasises submission of Muslims to God and, by a logical extension, the submission of non-Muslims to Muslims.

'Fight and slay the Pagans wherever you find them, and seize them, beleaguer them, and lie in wait for them in every stratagem (of war)', says the Qur'an (Surah 9, verse 5). An explanatory note in the respected translation by A. Yusuf Ali makes clear that this is not intended metaphorically: 'When war becomes inevitable it must be pursued with vigour.... The fighting may take the form of slaughter, or capture, or siege, or ambush and other stratagems.'

There are some Muslims who argue that this verse need not be interpreted literally any more, but the orthodox majority hold that the Qur'an is the immutable word of God. It is true that the Qur'an also contains verses urging tolerance of non-Muslims but these

While many atrocities have been committed in the name of Christianity, they are not sanctioned by the teachings of the Christian faith

verses pre-date the more belligerent ones. Islamic scholars have a simple rule to deal with such contradictions in the Qur'an: the later verse takes precedence.

Another verse from the Qur'an which is not often quoted in non-Islamic contexts runs: 'You shall be summoned to fight against a people given to vehement war: then shall you fight or they shall submit' (Surah 48, verse 16). The meaning here is that the Muslims should fight until their opponents embrace Islam.

Spread by the sword

In the early days of Islam, the faith was indeed spread by the sword. Those who would not embrace Islam were killed. The same thing is happening today in Indonesia, where at least 8,000 Christians have been forcibly converted to Islam by well-armed Islamic extremists. Any who refused were killed.

Furthermore, many Christians are being killed by Muslims without any conditions being offered. Some ten thousand have been killed in Indonesia in the last two years or so, with the explicit aim of eradicating Christianity. In the same time period there have been many violent incidents in Nigeria in which thousands of Christians have been killed, their houses and churches destroyed.¹ In Sudan, the Arab Islamic government has been at war since 1983 with the African peoples of the South, who are mainly Christians or follow traditional African religions, apparently intent on killing them all, civilians and military.

Sheikh Omar Bakri Mohamed of the British-based organisation, Al-Muhajiroun, published on his organisation's website on 13th Septem-

ber (two days after the World Trade Centre attack) an interview in which he distinguished between civilian and military targets. He indicated that military and government entities were legitimate targets for Muslims to attack. On 31st August the Kuwaiti paper Al-Watan presented arguments to justify the killing of non-combatants by Muslims. The article was concerned particularly with Jewish non-combatants, but the thrust of the argument would make it applicable to any non-Muslims living in a democracy. Citizens of a democracy have voted for their government and pay taxes to it, ran the argument, therefore they can be attacked as if they were the government or military.²

Television news has shown us the grotesque sight of Palestinian Muslims celebrating the World Trade Centre attack. They are not alone. Similar reports are coming in of grass-roots Muslim celebrations in other parts of the world. In London a poster appeared outside Finsbury Park Mosque the day after the attack. It showed the remains of the World Trade Centre and photos of George W. Bush and Tony Blair. The text read: 'Death to Bush. Death to Blair. Taliban.' It is hard to continue to argue that only 'a few extremists' are hostile to the West and the non-Muslim world when this kind of response is so widespread.

Two strands in contemporary Islam

So there are clearly two strands in contemporary Islam: the peaceable and the war-like. Islam is not one or the other; it is both at the same time. In this it differs from Christianity. While many atrocities have been committed in the name of Christianity, they are not

As Christians in the West it is right for us to be concerned for minorities in our midst, including Muslims

sanctioned by the teachings of the Christian faith, whose founder is called 'The Prince of Peace' and whose law is summed up as love for God and others.³ Atrocities committed in the name of Islam may be deplored by many individual Muslims, but it cannot be denied that they are justified by Islamic teaching.

Non-Muslim minorities

Islam also differs from Christianity in its treatment of those of other religions. As time went on it was no longer possible for Muslims to kill all those who refused to accept Islam, so rules were formulated to govern the treatment of non-Muslim minorities. These were based not only on the Qur'an but also on traditions about Muhammad's own words and actions, and formed part of the Shari'ah (Islamic law).

According to the Shari'ah, non-Muslims living within Muslim societies were to be treated very much as second-class citizens. Numerous petty laws restricted and humiliated them in their daily lives at work, at worship, in the law courts etc. Those who left Islam to follow another religion were, according to the Shari'ah, to be killed. The general attitude of contempt for non-Muslims still exists in many Muslim countries and they find themselves discriminated against in many ways. Similarly, the ruling that a convert from Islam is deserving of death is still followed in some countries today, as, for example, in Afghanistan, in Saudi Arabia and in Iran. Even where it is illegal to kill converts, most will find themselves severely harassed and sometimes murdered with little likelihood of punishment for the murderer.

Christians and other non-Muslims living in Muslim-majority contexts suffer in a multitude of ways and feel themselves powerless and voiceless.

As Christians in the West it is right for us to be concerned for minorities in our midst, including Muslims. It is right for us to seek harmony in society and tolerance for all. It is right for us to condemn vigilante attacks on innocent Muslims just because their faith might be shared by the terrorists who destroyed the World Trade Centre.

Conspiracy of silence

But let us not forget our fellow-Christians around the world who are also suffering innocently. It is unfair and unbiblical to keep silent about our Christian brothers and sisters in need, just because we want to spare the feelings of Muslims. Sometimes there seems to be a conspiracy of silence about the sufferings of Christians. This only adds to their pain. They are hurt, perplexed, baffled and despairing. They cannot understand why Christians who have the freedom and power to help them will not do so.

Muslims are not embarrassed to show that they care first and foremost about their co-religionists. As Christians who follow a God of love, can we do less? Our brothers and sisters depend on us.

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Endnotes

- 1 Unfortunately, some Nigerian Christians have been provoked into retaliation and have reacted to the killing and destruction of their homes and churches by burning mosques and Muslims' homes and by killing Muslims. *Ed.*
- 2 Western minds find it hard to grasp that Islam is essentially a theocratic creed, where every aspect of state and individual life is tightly bound up with, and inextricable from, the daily practice of the religion. It is this socio-political aspect of Islam which we too often fail to take into account in our thinking about Muslim attitudes. *Ed.*
- 3 Too often, the name of Christ has been dishonoured down the centuries by violence and killing, as in the decades following the Reformation with the burning of Catholics by Protestants and the burning of Protestants by Catholics. There was also the notorious Spanish Inquisition – unbelievably perpetrated in the name of God. In earlier centuries, the Crusades also violated the teaching of Jesus Christ. Many of these atrocities were committed because the theology of the day failed to understand the Old Testament dispensation in the light of Christ's incarnation, redemptive work and the establishment of a kingdom that is 'not of this world'. *Ed.*

Preaching from

Derek Prime, Edinburgh

In this article, the substance of an address given to ministers earlier this year, Derek Prime allows us quietly to watch and listen as he works in his study on a sermon on David and Goliath

The passage chosen is 1 Samuel 17, the well known account of David's victory over Goliath. Our subject is clearly important since forty per cent of the Old Testament is historical narrative. Indeed, more than half the Bible is narrative or biographical. To teach the whole counsel of God, therefore, we must preach from the narrative the Bible provides.

Narrative presents its own challenges and snares

We must not make the mistake of imagining that every part of a narrative has spiritual significance. Rather we must discern why the Holy Spirit has chosen to include it. We must determine whether the truths taught are doctrinal or practical. The practical is more frequent in narrative, but doctrines are often there – and especially present in illustration.

The question of application is important

At what point do we make our application in dealing with narrative? Do we make it at the conclusion? However, if so, may not our listeners have been lost to us because they feel the whole thing is remote from them? Alternatively, should we suggest early on – perhaps in a limited manner – what we feel the main thrust of our application is going to be? The latter is probably wise.

Narrative has particular advantages

It tends to be memorable. It can stir the imagination. Because narrative is invariably connected with people, it possesses an immediate capacity to interest people and to involve them. When a truth is contained within a narrative, we do not need to look for practical illustration because its illustration is already present. If I offered to describe someone's face to you or to show you a photograph, which would you choose? There is no doubt about your answer! Narrative is like a photograph in its ability to capture the illustration of truth.

Difficulties with regard to 1 Samuel 17

There are three obvious difficulties.

First, if we read the whole of the chapter, discerning readers or listeners may find a question in their minds concerning Saul's ignorance of David in view of the mention of the relationship between the two described in 1 Samuel 16:21, where David entered Saul's service as a musician and armour bearer (cf. 17:55-58).

Various theories have been expressed, including the ideas that Saul pretended not to recognize David, or that his particular mental condition – a paranoid schizophrenia – occasioned such non-recognition, or that on the first occasion (1 Sam. 16:14ff) Saul was made aware of David as an individual, and that on the second (1 Sam. 17:55ff) Saul's inquiry concerned the pedigree and social standing of David as a qualification for his admission as a hero to the king's company and court.

Generally, I prefer going always for the simplest explanation. In this case, it is that having started in chapter 16 talking about David, the writer continued his theme further than the period of time with which he was dealing. 1

Historical Narrative

Samuel 16:14-23 almost certainly refers to what happened after the death of Goliath. Chapter 17 explains what occurred between 16:1-13 and 16:14-23.

If part of a series of consecutive sermons on 1 Samuel, I would deal with this issue, although probably at the time of the public reading the passage, rather than in the exposition. If the sermon were a 'one-off' from the book of 1 Samuel, I would not raise it.

Second, it is perhaps too familiar. It is more often dealt with in Sunday school than in church. Graeme Goldsworthy describes the dilemma of someone about to speak at a Sunday School Anniversary Service:

The invitation to speak at the anniversary service has faced Ken with a new problem. He cannot simply rehash the story in accordance with the lesson material of their Sunday school curriculum (not that he was very happy with it anyway!). His uneasiness about the method of telling a Bible story was intensified a couple of weeks previously when he listened to another speaker at a

children's rally present the story of David and Goliath. It had been well done and the children loved it. There had been lots of excitement in the play-acting of that great victory by God's chosen leader, and the use of visual aids had been carried out with care and precision. But Ken was most troubled by the way the speaker had applied the story. The fellow dressed up as Goliath had progressively revealed a list of childhood sins by peeling cardboard strips off his breastplate one by one, as the speaker explained the kind of 'Goliaths' we all have to meet. Then a strapping young David had appeared on cue, and produced his arsenal – a sling labelled 'faith' and five stones listed as 'obedience', 'service', 'Bible reading', 'prayer' and 'fellowship'. The speaker had omitted to say which stone actually killed Goliath – a matter which caused a little mirth when Ken discussed the talk with some friends. But underneath the mirth was a real sense of uneasiness and confusion over the matter of how such an

Old Testament story should be applied. Ken was troubled by all this because six months ago he would have done exactly the same thing. But now as he prepares to take the platform he is very unsure about it all. He has come to appreciate more of the historical unity and progression of the biblical events. Somehow the ingenious jumps from Goliath to our sins, from David's weapons to our faith and Christian virtues, and, more significantly, from David to ourselves seems at the one time both logical yet arbitrary. Any wonder Ken is still troubled! He is about to give a talk which leans heavily on the same kind of approach and which seems to say something valid without clear reasons for its validity' (*Gospel and Kingdom*, p.10).

However, although the narrative is almost too familiar to some, I would aim in the sermon to recount the story for many who will not know it so well – as evidenced, for example, in television quiz programmes.

Our Approach

Third, we have to answer an important question – with whom are we to identify in the passage. With David or with Israel? Or with both?

It always helps to ask, 'How should I approach this particular passage?' Certain answers quickly come to mind.

- the space given to it indicates its importance.
- I need to read and examine the passage, without any assumptions as to how I will deal with it; it may help to

read it in another contemporary translation or even in several.

- I should act upon the principle established in 1 Corinthians 10:11: 'These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfilment of the ages has come.'
- while there may be a number of lessons to learn, I must major on discovering the main lesson or thrust of the passage: why was this passage recorded? what truths is it meant to teach?

• as I go along I should note any New Testament passages that it may illustrate – and immediately I think of Ephesians 6:10-20 and 1 Corinthians 1:26-31.

• similarly I should jot down psalms and songs of David that reflect the confidence in God he displayed in this incident; they may provide clues to our understanding of his attitude.

• the most important approach, however, is to ask the right questions of the passage, and to be guided by the answers; these questions aid a detailed examination of the narrative, especially when it is already familiar (I would

Ten Questions and Ten Quick Answers

There are ten questions I aim to ask of any passage, and they are especially relevant and helpful with regard to historical narrative. Although the answers are perhaps obvious, it may be helpful if I share what my own rough notes were to illustrate what I have in mind. I have not edited these for the sake of this article but I simply share what I wrote down at the time. These initial thoughts may not be incorporated into what I preach, and at this point, I am not thinking of a sermon or its structure.

1. What do the words actually mean? I jotted down the following at which I thought I should look.

'Philistines' (1), 'champion' (4), 'defy' (26) the phrase 'living God' (26).

2. What light do other parts of the Bible throw on this part? A number of things came immediately to mind and I wrote them down without comment. The Book of Psalms throws light upon David's trust in God.

The honour of God – His Name – should be our major concern; David's perception of this.

The first petition of the Lord's Prayer, 'Hallowed be Your Name.'

The Lord Jesus is an example of zeal for God's Name and honour.

The theme of conflict and battle is taken up in the New Testament, and especially in Ephesians 6:10-20

3. Where and how does what this part declares fit into the completely revelation God gives us in the Bible on this subject?

It is an illustration of why God could describe David as a man after his own heart (1 Samuel 13:14; Acts 13:22).

It is an example of the experience of God that David had that is so frequently recorded in the book of Psalms.

The Bible consistently teaches that the secret of His people's success is not with them, but with Him.

It is a pointer and a reminder that God's deliverance comes to His people through His anointed one – chapter 16 significantly describes David's anointing.

4. What does it teach about God?

He is the living God.

He is the covenant keeping God (the reference to Goliath as uncircumcised).

He is the delivering God. He is the God to be trusted and obeyed.

5. What does it teach about men and women in their relationship to God?

Pride – as in the case of Goliath – leads to its downfall.

God humbles the proud, and exalts the humble.
 The proper relationship of men and women to God is one of trust.
 God's people should be supremely concerned for God's honour.

6. What relationship have these words to the saving work of Christ, and what light does the gospel of Christ as a whole throw upon them?
 Our champion is the Lord Jesus Christ – He is uniquely God's anointed One.
 Our Saviour set an example of honouring God and being concerned above all for His Father's glory.
 The Cross was not only for our good, but also for the glory of the Father – in it the glories of God's character are proclaimed.
 In the Lord Jesus Christ we know salvation and deliverance, and a delivering grace that is continually renewed to us.

7. What experiences do these words outline, or explain, or try to create or cure?
 We – God's people – are often marked by failure, and especially when it comes to recognising how God's honour is at stake in our behaviour. (I note that this must be part of any application of this passage.)
 We are in a spiritual battle.
 The most important issue is God's honour.
 We only approach the battle properly when we see what the real issues are.
 We are not to be daunted by outward show.
 We are to appreciate the almighty power of God and our hidden resources.
 Strength and success come from the Lord.

8. What was the application of these words to the people at the time?
 Israel was rebuked at her lack of perception and faith.
 Israel was reminded of the secret of her success – the shout of the king.

9. How do these words apply to us now?
 Our battle is not physical but spiritual.
 The secret of success is in God: we are to be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might.
 We need to discern the real issues, ensuring that the honour God is our supreme concern.

10. What are we told either to believe or to do?
 We are to believe that greater is He that is in us than he who is in the world.
 We are to fight the Lord's battles with the Lord's strength.
 When others are depressed, afraid and pessimistic, we must not hesitate to turn their attention to the Lord.
 We are to learn to use our spiritual weapons – the sword of the Spirit and prayer.

like to suggest you read the Bible passage again at this stage.)

The Service

Next consider the service of which the sermon will be part. As I answer these questions, I find thoughts and ideas about the integration of the passage into the whole service of which it will be part. One of the hymns or songs could helpfully dwell upon God's Name. A psalm of David, like 34, would be appropriate, or its paraphrase in *Through all the changing scenes of life*. The introductory verses or invitation

to worship at the beginning of the service could be 1 Corinthians 1:26-31. Ephesians 6 would be a good NT passage to read, with some brief explanation given of the significance of the armour and where our strength is to be found.

An outline sermon

Introduction

The challenge of failure

Failure is the background to the whole story. However, the failure is not simply failure to overcome Goliath, but failure to see how God's honour was involved. This was the perception

David had, and that made the difference.

The vital response of faith

David stands out in the narrative and he significantly introduces 'in God's Name', and what he knows about God. Faith's foundation is its knowledge of God, and of His Name.

Illustrations of failure

Here I have in view our contemporary failures. Three come to mind—and to deal with more than that would be to get things out of balance. First, the failure of Christian marriages; second, the breakdown of relationships between ministers/pastors and people;

and third, the failure to evangelize with a focus on God's honour.

With this possible skeleton in mind, I go through all I have jotted down up until now, and form a more detailed skeleton or draft sermon.

Draft Sermon on 1 Samuel 17

Introduction

Set the scene. The Philistines and the Israelites at war. The important anointing of David in chapter 16.

The challenge of failure

The Israelites knew abysmal failure – the significant comment of Judges 3:4. The challenge can be both personal and corporate – we know both.

Failure tends to be repeated (v.16). Failure often has a history – the Israelites' previous encounters with the Philistines. Failure brings fear (vs.11, 24). Fear makes us run (v.24). Failure brings dismay when the challenge reappears (v.11). Our failure makes us condemn ourselves. Our failure makes us afraid to fight. Our failure makes us fragile and critical of others, especially if they shame us in some way (v.28). We then resort to merely human reasoning: 'You are not able' (v.33).

The challenge is all the greater when we realise who we are, and whom we profess to serve: we are God's people, and we serve the Lord Christ. We too have an enemy – greater than Goliath – who challenges us.

The perception of the real issues

When failure comes, we tend to think primarily of its reflection upon us. Pride figures in our lives more than we like to admit. David had the perception to realise that more was at stake. The real issue was the honour of God – the honour of His Name. The Philistines worshipped many gods (Judg.10:6). David realised that the challenge was not between the Philistines and the Israelites, but between their gods and the God of Israel.

The Israelites were afraid for their own skins; David was afraid for the honour of God (1 Sam.17:25, 26). The failure of God's people was that their behaviour did not reflect God's character.

God is living: they behaved as if he were dead. God is almighty: they behaved as if he were powerless. God is able to deliver: they behaved as if he could not. David's perception was part of his being a man after God's own heart.

The vital response of faith

Faith's object: David's eyes were neither on himself nor the enemy but upon the Lord; without faith it is impossible to please God (Heb.11:6). The proper object of faith is the Lord – and, specifically for us, the Lord Jesus Christ in whom the Father has perfectly revealed himself.

David's eyes were upon God's character. His trust was in the living God, who acts and intervenes in human life and who can be trusted to implement his promises. God is a covenant-keeping God. He is the God therefore who inspires hope (1 Sam.17:26). Faith's highest goal is the honour of God.

David wanted God to be seen as *the living God* in opposition to the dead gods of the Philistines.

David wanted God to be seen as *the almighty God* in opposition to the powerless gods of the Philistines.

David wanted God to be seen as *the delivering God* in opposition to the gods of the Philistines who could not deliver.

The passage indicates *faith's experience*: David had proved God's power to deliver.

So real was that deliverance that it made him sing – e.g. the psalms! Faith's experience of God in the past provides a solid basis for the future. Faith's confidence: David was confident of God's Name. Faith's victory came as David was obedient to what he knew about God. One person's faith, put into practice, can help others. When others of God's people are not living by faith, that is no excuse for our not doing so.

Illustrations of failure

Where are our most frequent areas of failure?

- personal: the failure of Christians in marriage
- corporate: the failure of Christians in relationships, for example between pastor and church
- corporate: failure to be effective in evangelism. We may be critical of those who try to be innovative in outreach, and yet do nothing ourselves.

The critical issue is one of insight. In failure, we need to perceive the real issues.

In marriage difficulties, it is not only establishing who is in the right and who is in the wrong – i.e. apportioning blame – but recognizing how our behaviour reflects on the character of the God who we profess to believe in and to serve. Our responsibility in marriage, as in everything, is to show how attractive the gospel of Christ is.

In our corporate failures, we need to perceive the real issues. In relationships, we are not to have secret agendas, but a concern for the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ. In our actions, we are to have our eyes upon the effect our actions will have upon others, especially our Lord's warning about causing little ones to stumble.

Conclusions

- let us be honest and name our failures
- let us identify the vital issues
- let us exercise faith – personally and corporately

God is the same in all the circumstances, for David whether with the sheep defending them from lions and bears or before Goliath. God is the same whether we are facing personal failure or corporate failure.

Three priorities:

- prayer with God's honour our priority
- deliberate dwelling upon God's Name
- behaviour that befits our confidence in God's Name

A significant statement of David in Psalm 14: 'Oh, that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion! When the LORD restores the fortunes of his people, let Jacob rejoice and Israel be glad!'

As I now proceed to write or type my sermon, these notes provide my detailed skeleton, and will be adapted and changed as necessary along the way.

Worship

David Easton, Glasgow

Paper given at the Crieff Conference, March 20, 2000

The sanctuary and halls of Burnside Parish Church, where David Easton has been minister since 1977 is presently undergoing a massive renovation. David reflects theologically on the (often unperceived) influence of the architecture and state of the buildings in which Christians meet and on the 'how' of NT worship.

I have found help in a recent book by Larry Hurtado who is professor of New Testament Language, Literature, and Theology at Edinburgh University. The book, *At the Origins of Christian Worship*, is an examination of Christian worship in early Christian times. The account he gives of those features which marked the coming together for worship of Christians in NT times particularly interested me. He sets their corporate, devotional practices in the context of the religious environment of the Roman era, and asks what it was about Christian worship which attracted those from a

pagan background who came to faith in Christ as Saviour and Lord.

One of the defining features of early Christianity was *who* and *how* they worshipped. That was a talking point in pagan society. For our present purposes, we are more concerned with the 'how' than the 'who' (the 'who' readers of this Journal can take for granted, though Hurtado's demonstration that from the beginning they worshipped Christ alongside God the Father has important implications for Christology). But before we look at the 'how' of worship then, we should perhaps pause to ask whether the matter of *who* and *how* we worship today stimulates the same curiosity, provokes the same kind of questions, leads to the same kind of argument, and inflames the same hostility among those in our society who don't share our faith as it did among the pagans of the Roman era. It is salutary to learn that what happened when Christians came together for worship was a matter of public comment. Why is it not so today?

In describing the 'how' of Christian worship in the early Christian era,

Hurtado briefly lists five features which are of relevance for us as we engage with the issues which most discussions of worship raise. He sets them in the context of a culture in which pagan religion flourished. It had a high profile in both public and private life, and pervaded society at every level. In other words, the Christian faith had to compete in a crowded market place.

Incidentally, he knocks on the head the notion that many turned to the Christian faith because they had lost faith in pagan religion. Some readers may have preached that three-pointer sermon on Galatians 4:4 ('When the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son') in which we list three things which made the first century the moment in history when God put his plan of salvation into effect – the *Pax Romana*, a common language, and the decline of pagan religion. The first two points may be valid, but the third doesn't stand up to examination. So the bit about the old gods having failed, and there being no new god to take their place, leaving a god-shaped gap in people's lives which only God in Christ could fill, will have to be ex-

cised next time we preach on that text. Hurtado says:

The religious environment of earliest Christianity was diverse, vigorous, and flourishing. It is not as though there were large portions of the population of the Roman empire who were religiously dissatisfied and waiting for something like Christianity to come along to provide them with religious meaning.... Christianity had to compete in a very active religious 'market', and if it won adherents it did so by offering 'products' and 'services' that could be perceived as comparing favourably with what else was on offer. Particularly because Christians were expected to make their Christian faith their sole religion and renounce participation in the other religious options of the time, what was offered in Christian groups had to be seen by adherents as worth forsaking the alternatives. Powerfully attractive features must have been perceived. (p.37)

We may feel uncomfortable with the language of the 'market place', and of 'products' and 'services', but the point is valid that converts from pagan religion found in Christian worship something which more than compensated for the grand temples and shrines, the loss of the exotic rituals, and social benefits of pagan religion. What were these powerfully attractive features?

Intimacy

The setting for worship was a home, and, as an important feature of first century worship was the common meal, the meeting place would probably be the dining-room.. This would limit the number who could be accommodated to three or four dozen at most if the house were a Roman villa belonging to a better-off member of the fellowship. The congregation thus enjoyed close fellowship in the literal sense of the word.

The picture of intimacy is further filled out by Paul's reference to the 'one loaf' and the 'cup' in 1 Corinthians 10:16-17, ('Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread which we break a participation in the body of Christ?. Because there is one loaf, we who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf'), and we can infer that there was also one cup. Then too the intimacy of the gathering is reflected in the gesture of the 'holy kiss' in Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians and 1 Thessalonians (Rom.16:16; 1Cor.16:20; 2Cor.13:12; 1Thess.5:26). Peter in his First Letter also refers to 'the kiss of love' (5:14).

The venue for worship, the meal which was at the centre of their gathering, and the kiss all reflect the intimacy which was characteristic of early Christian worship.

People want to feel that the worship which is offered to God is their worship, not a ritual performed on their behalf by the minister... but an act in which they are not merely spectators but participants

Is intimacy the striking feature of our gatherings for worship? I know that many of the buildings we meet in, their shape and layout, the fixed seating, and the choice of many to sit as far back and as far away from anyone else as possible, militate against any sense of intimacy, but do we do all we can within given limits to overcome the problem? Do we encourage other forms of meeting where the intimacy of the early Christian worship can be experienced. And what measures do we take to make the celebration of the Lord's Supper more of a family occasion?

Participation

A recent report of the Panel on Worship to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland alleged that the cry in the church today is for greater participation by the congregation in worship. People want to feel that the worship which is offered to God is their worship, not a ritual performed on their behalf by the minister, perhaps with the help of the choir, but an act in which they are not merely spectators but participants.

Early Christian worship was open to contributions from members of the congregation, regardless of race ('There is neither Jew nor Greek' Gal.3.28a), or social class ('slave nor free' v.28b), or gender ('male nor female' v.28c). (Cf. 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 where Paul gives instructions relating to women praying and prophesying in church.) The contributions

varied in nature ('When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation' 1 Cor.14:26a), but their common purpose was to build up the church ('All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church' v.26b).

David Peterson, in his book *Engaging with God* shows how when Paul deals with the function and purpose of Christian gatherings, he regularly uses the language of upbuilding, or of edification, along with the language of worship, that is he doesn't speak about worshipping, singing, and praying (words which we associate with the

activity of worship) without also speaking about encouraging one another, instructing one another, admonishing one another, and building one another up (words which have a building connotation). See for example the instructions he gives to the church in Corinth on how they should conduct themselves when they gather for worship (1Cor. 14:3,4,5,12,17, and 26).

Would it be true to say that this emphasis on the participation of all for the 'strengthening of the church', as Paul puts it, is one which we have neglected, and that if we wish our practice to be faithful to those emphases which we find in Scripture, then opportunity ought to be given in our services for the ministry of mutual encouragement? Peterson writes:

There should be some public opportunity for spontaneous and informal ministries as well as for the ordered and prepared.... It is sometimes said that the size of our gatherings or the physical context makes it impossible to put such NT teaching into practice. People who argue this way show little imagination or willingness to reassess their traditions even though others in the contemporary scene have found helpful solutions to these problems. It may be a matter of finding appropriate spots in the regular pattern of Sunday services where contributions can be made. It may be a matter of rearranging the furniture or encouraging people to gather together differently so that those who contribute can be more easily seen and heard. (*Engaging with God*, p.214f.)

Fervour

The fervour of early Christian worship is seen in their joy as they broke bread in one another's homes (Acts 2:47) as well as in the exercise of the gifts of the Spirit when they gathered for worship, and particularly in the fact that some of the gifts, at least, were the result of di-

Do those who have lost their joy, whose fervour has waned and who have grown weary of well-doing... find in our worship that which lifts their spirits and rekindles their zeal?

rect inspiration (1Cor.12:4-11;14:26, etc.).

More than that, not only was their worship characterised by fervour; it was also the means of stimulating fervour, as there was the recognition that as Christians we may lose our joy and our fervour may wane. In that connection it is surely significant that the exhortation in Hebrews 10:19-25 to 'hold unswervingly to the hope we profess,' and to 'spur one another on towards love and good deeds,' and to encourage one another, is accompanied by the injunction not to 'give up meeting together'.

For a year as a student I lodged with Jeannie (not her correct name) who was a member of the Assemblies of God. She was large in girth, in heart, and deeply pious in a way which sometimes provoked me to sarcasm. I found particularly annoying her habit of playing on the radiogram (that tells you how long ago this was!) what she called 'the glory record'-an LP (it might even have been a '78') of upbeat hymns, songs and choruses which she said helped her to 'catch the glory' whenever she was in a spiritual trough. So if I came home to find this music blasting through the flat, I knew Jeannie was in the dumps. The trouble was that what inspired her irritated me. (I suppose that is part of the problem with worship; what helps some doesn't help others.) But in the light of what Hebrews tells us about the need to stimulate our flagging fervour through worship together, perhaps I shouldn't have been so scornful about Jeannie's 'glory record'.

Do our acts of worship reflect the high significance of our coming together? Do they do justice to the exalted nature of the occasion? Does the transcendent element, the presence of God in Christ among us, fill us with awe?

Is fervour one of the marks of our services? Do those who have lost their joy, whose fervour has waned and who have grown weary of well-doing, for whatever reasons, find in our worship that which lifts their spirits and rekindles their zeal?

Significance

Don't forget how impressive pagan religion was – the grandeur of the temples, the colour of the ritual, the social activities connected to the worship of various deities, the network of business contacts which belonging to a pagan cult provided. In comparison, the setting of Christian worship was modest – a home. What took place in worship was plain and simple in contrast to the colourful and elaborate rituals of pagan worship; and in the eyes of society they were a despised minority ('Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth' 1 Cor.1:27). But what they lacked in temples, ritual, and social acceptance, they possessed in their understanding of who they were, and that invested their gatherings for worship with significance.

How did they see themselves? It would take too long to pull together all the strands of their self-understanding, but I would point you to chapters 1 and 2 of Ephesians (chosen by God before the creation of the world, citizens with the saints, members of the household of God, forming a holy temple in the Lord in which God himself dwells), and to 1 Peter 2:4f. (again, God's temple made up of living stones, as well as a holy priesthood who offer

spiritual sacrifices which are acceptable to God through Christ), and to the Letters to the Seven Churches in Revelation where they are promised 'the crown of life... authority over the nations' and a place with Christ on his throne (2:10; 2:26; 3:21).

Now with such a sense of their identity and destiny, it is no surprise that their modest gatherings were shot through with high meaning:

But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, to the city of the living God, you have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn whose names are written in heaven,. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks of a better word than the blood of Abel. (Heb.12-22-24)

What awesome terms with which to describe a gathering in a dining-room!

The transcendent dimension is also implied in Paul's reference to angels being present when the church gathers for worship (1 Cor.10:11). Above all, of course, we have the promise of Jesus that if even only two or three believers meet in his name, he is present among them and gives effect to their prayers (Matt.18:20).

We have to ask: Do we have a sense of who we are when we gather for worship? Do our acts of worship reflect the high significance of our coming together. Do they do justice to the exalted nature of the occasion? Does the transcendent element, the presence of God in Christ among us, fill us with awe?

Donald McCullough, in his book *The Trivialisation of God* writes:

Visit a church on a Sunday morning – almost any one will do – and you will likely find a congregation comfortably relating to a deity who fits nicely within pre-

cise doctrinal positions, or who lends almighty support to social crusades, or who conforms to individual spiritual experiences. But you will not likely find much awe or sense of mystery. The only sweaty palms will be those of the preacher unsure whether his sermon will go over; the only shaking knees will be those of the soloist about to sing during the offertory.

Potency

The potency of the gathering for worship follows from the significance of the occasion. If we take seriously who we are in God's sight, if we are aware of the meaning of our gathering, then it will come as no surprise that worship is the context in which God's power will be manifested.

It is seen positively, in the exercise of the gifts – it is significant that Paul deals with the *charismata* in the context of a discussion on how we ought to conduct ourselves in worship (1Cor.12-14). It is also seen negatively, and indeed ominously, in evidences of God's judgement on sin in the fellowship. The obvious example here is the warning which Paul gives in 1 Corinthians 11:27-32 about the danger of eating and drinking judgement on themselves through not recognising that the church is the Lord's body. There is also the instruction which Paul gives in the matter of the man who is living with his father's wife in 1 Corinthians 5:1ff.: 'When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus, and I am present with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord'.

Conclusion

Here then, are the features of Christian worship in NT times which Hurtado highlights and which provide a benchmark by which we may evaluate what takes place when we gather for worship today. The question for us all is: How does what takes place in our

Anyone coming into this place would think God was dead!

churches on a Sunday, and perhaps in other contexts throughout the week, measure up?

David Wells, in *God in the Wasteland*, speaks of the 'Reader's Digest Spirituality' which has now become identified with evangelicalism – a spirituality which is 'light, bouncy, simple, fun, engaging, and uplifting'. He argues:

God rests only lightly on the church. His Word, if it is preached at all, does not summon. His Christ, if he is seen at all, is impoverished, thin, pale, and scarcely capable of inspiring awe, and his riches are entirely searchable. If God is at the centre of worship, one has to wonder why there is so much surrounding the centre which is superfluous to worship... [what the church needs most is] God in his grace and truth, God in his awesome and holy presence, not a folder full of hot ideas for reviving the church's flagging programmes.

Though he writes from an American perspective, it would be impossible to disagree with him. There are issues which lurk around the edges of any discussion on worship which I feel we have to address in the church today, while recognising their relative unimportance beside the church's fundamental need, which is God.

As we gather to worship God and share in all the other activities which take place in our buildings, the determining factor is not the physical surroundings. They may please or offend aesthetically, lift or depress the spirit, evoke the past or point us to the future; but be they bright and pleasing or drab and dispiriting, redolent of earlier centuries or radically

contemporary, what matters is the presence or the absence of the Spirit who, as Jesus said, is like the wind which 'blows wherever it pleases' (John 3:8). In other words, the Spirit of God enables us to transcend the limitations imposed upon us by the fabric of our buildings. Glory may break through in the most unlikely surroundings, as it did for John when he was in the Spirit on the Lord's day on the island of Patmos. That goes without saying. But there is no denying that buildings project images.

I remember being part of a committee sent to meet with the office-bearers of a congregation which was passing through difficult times. They were a very dispirited band of people, and that was reflected both in the acrimony and the aggression which surfaced in the course of our discussion, and in the sorry, depressing state of the sanctuary and the halls. I recall how at one point in the meeting, a man rose to his feet, and trembling with passion, said, 'Anyone coming into this place would think God was dead!' And he was right.

Many of us have to wrestle with the questions which buildings pose for the church today. In most situations we can't do away with the buildings we have, even though in many cases they are more of a liability than an asset. Where new buildings are erected, they should express a biblical understanding of the church, its worship, and its mission. That is their only justification.

So far as existing buildings are concerned, we should do all in our powers to ensure that they are functional and serve the church's God-given programme, rather than determine what that programme shall be. Too many congregations are imprisoned in their buildings, shackled and confined by the limitations which their property imposes on their worship, service, and

witness. The harsh truth is, I suppose, that in many cases these limitations have to be accepted. The cost of overcoming them is beyond the resources of most congregations. But where possible, congregations should take action, however modest, to help them break free from the stranglehold which Howard Snyder, in his book *New Wineskins*, calls the 'edifice complex'.

“Death or Glory”

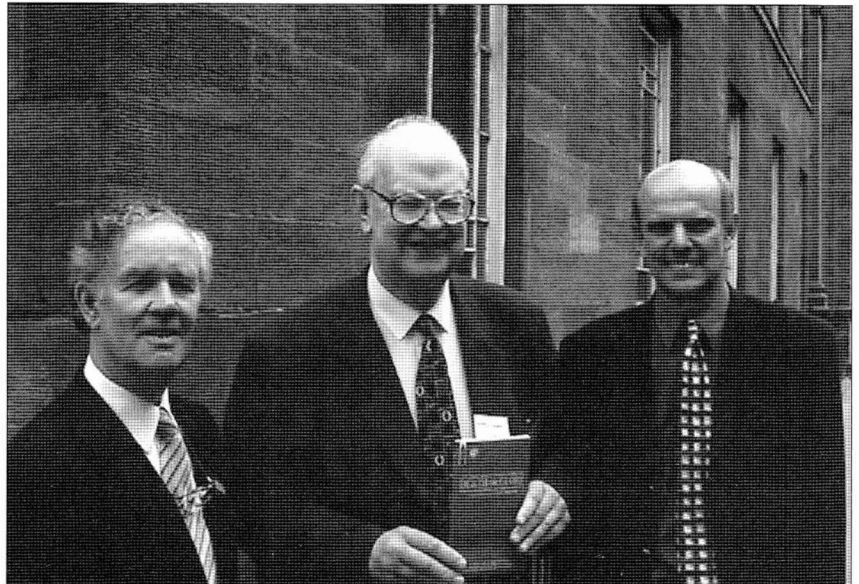
At the 2nd Scottish Ministry Assembly in June this year, the publication of a book in honour of Dr Geoffrey Grogan was launched.

The book consists of papers given at the SETS conference in 1996 on the theme *Death or Glory? The church's mission in Scotland's changing society*, addressing the challenges of declining faith commitment and growing secularisation, when the Scottish Evangelical Theological Society, of which Geoffrey Grogan was chairman for 26 years, joined with Evangelical Alliance in hosting the conference to commemorate the 150th Anniversary of the Evangelical Alliance

The book is jointly published by Rutherford House and Christian Focus, and its contributors are: Dr David Smith, Whitefield Institute; Prof David Bebbington, University of Stirling; Dr Will Storrar, University of Edinburgh; the Revd Dr Chris Wright, All Nations College; the Revd Peter Neilson, St Cuthbert's, Edinburgh; the Revd Albert Bogle, Bo'ness; John MacKinnon, formerly SU Scotland; and the Revd David Anderson, Evangelical Alliance, Scotland.

*'Informative and inspirational. Theological and practical. The value of **Death or Glory** is that it offers a look at mission in Scotland from several different angles helping us to gain our 360 degree perspective. Scotland cannot rely on its spiritual heritage from the past. I hope this helpfully challenges the church to face the task of the future. It would be a sin if those in other parts of the United Kingdom did not read and benefit from these reflections. There is so much that those south of the border and elsewhere can learn'.*

Derek Tidball, London Bible College



From left: The Warden, Geoffrey Grogan, and David Anderson after the launch of *Death or Glory*.

Death or Glory
Edited by David C Searle

Sermon on the Sixth Commandment

The Apostle Paul tell us that *the law is spiritual* (Rom.7:14).

Paul didn't dream that up himself. It was God who laid down that obedience to the sixth commandment was far more than refraining from murder, for we read in Leviticus, *You shall not hate your brother in your heart* (19:17).

When preachers are expounding the ten commandments, and they reach the sixth, they almost invariably hurry over the question of murder and direct most of their sermon negatively to the subject of hatred, and positively to the subject of love. They tend to go to that part of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt.5:21ff), where our Lord shows us that we can violate the sixth commandment in our hearts, and do violence to a person through hatred, slander or gossip. After all, we all know that many a reputation and good name have been 'murdered' without ever a blow being struck. That form of sin becomes the main burden of the exposition. Of course that is quite correct.

However it is surely necessary to consider the actual subject of murder as well as the manifestations of bitterness and hatred which too often lurk in the human heart. It is not just that the murder rate in Northern Ireland has been so phenomenally high during the tragic decades of the political troubles there. We tend to forget that in the United Kingdom and right across Europe crimes of violence and murder have been dramatically increasing since the 1960s. In 1991, there were 92 fatal stabbings in the city of Glasgow alone!

Revenge

The sixth commandment has only two words in the original Hebrew: *No murder*. But it is important to note that the word used generally describes *violent action taken in revenge*.

There is great confusion in our generation over this word 'revenge'. Our Bibles draw a clear distinction between revenge killing by an individual on the one hand, and execution by the state on the other hand. The two are not

synonymous in Biblical thinking. We are all aware of many voices today urging that violent murder on the one hand and the death penalty legally administered on the other hand are exactly the same. At this point in our argument, it is sufficient simply to deny categorically that they are the same, and to assert that in biblical thought revenge is unilateral action by one person (or family, as in a feud), meting out a personal, private sentence.

Taking the commandment to include the prohibition of violent action by one person against another, we can immediately see three contemporary applications. The first is the forbidding of personal revenge.

Let us take two examples from events in the United Kingdom within our own lifetime. One man's teenage daughter was savagely stabbed to death on Wimbledon Common, while a young couple's two year old son was abducted by two eleven year old boys, brutally killed and then callously mutilated. We all feel deeply for those

No Murder!

Exodus 20 verse 13

You shall not murder

parents who have suffered so greatly through these wicked murders, and we can understand when their grief is mingled with fierce anger against those who have violently robbed them of their children and the precious gift of life. When we hear their cries for justice and their threats against the convicted murderers, we hesitate to condemn the emotions fermenting in their hearts. What parent cannot empathise with the intensity of such feelings? But that is exactly the sense in which the commandment says, *No murder*. It means that those broken-hearted parents may not take their own revenge against the guilty, should they discover who they are. The sixth commandment means, *No murder for personal revenge*.

Racism

But the command goes further with a second contemporary application. It also means, *No racial hatred*. Most of us have forgotten how many Russians died in the Second World War. The figure is an astounding twenty million.

We have forgotten how many Jews went to the gas chambers: it was six million. And all that slaughter arose from racial hatred. It's hard to take it in, is it not?

Racial hatred was alive and active in Christ's day. It is alive and active in our day too. It sets the Basque against the Spaniard; the Breton against the Frenchman; the Quebecois against the Canadian; the Croat against the Serb; the Serb against the Bosnian; the Irish against the Ulsterman; the Ulsterman against the native Irish; the Scots, Welsh and Irish against the English; many English against the Pakistani and West Indian.

In both England and Scotland, there have been recent developments of racism which are causes of great concern. Even when a government tries to legislate against this evil, it seeps out under the doors which Acts of Parliament seek in vain to shut fast to keep it locked away.

Racism can start so innocently. It appeals to our sense of loyalty to our traditions and all we hold dear. It ap-

peals to us to safeguard our proud history, our flag and all the other symbols of national identity which appear to be threatened. Nevertheless, racial hatred is easily the world leader in causing this sixth commandment to be violated. More deaths in our world have been inspired by racial hatred than any other single cause.

There are evidences in most communities of the fruits of racial hatred. Those who live in Northern Ireland have only to travel beyond Newry to the border with the Republic to witness the massive security arrangements which have been made necessary by racial hatred. The seemingly innocent and tiny village of Middletown on the border of Monaghan has been turned into a grim fortress by the excesses of racism and its bitter consequences. Yet the commandment clearly states, *No murder-no revenge killing*.

Political violence

The third contemporary application of the commandment must be, *No violence for political ends*. It's not often that the

respectable, middle-class Ulster Unionist betrays his deepest feelings about 'The Troubles' (as the political turmoil of thirty years has been called). He leaves such vulgarity to the so-called sectarian bigots. However I recall several earnest conversations with men who were highly respected in both church and community who confided in me that they wished the Protestant paramilitaries would send a bullet between the eyes of some of Sinn Féin's leaders. 'That would be', they confided, 'a positive step towards sorting out our problems.'

Yet here we have the entrance to the three steps which lead down into the spiral of political violence. Step one is always the failure to forgive – at least, genuinely to offer forgiveness. Step two is the feud, for when you and I harbour a grudge, unable and unwilling to forgive, we are drawn into a feud. And step three is some kind of action to claim payment for what we see as debts owed to us from the feud. It is that third step which leads into the abyss of violence.

Think of the assassination attempt on Hitler in which Rommel and the theologian Bonhoeffer were implicated. As a result, Rommel, fine general and man of integrity that he was, had to take the poison given him by the Gestapo as the only alternative to court martial, public humiliation, and execution. Bonhoeffer was imprisoned and ultimately executed. But would the assassination of Hitler have solved the problem of Nazism? Undoubtedly had Hitler been killed in that attempt on his life, he would immediately have been succeeded by men of the same breed. Nazism needed to be defeated *per se*.

History confirms that the use of violence for political ends is futile. The harsh despotic rule of the Bourbon kings in France gave way to an even harsher, more despotic rule by Bonaparte, and so the flower of French manhood perished on the battlefields of the Napoleonic Wars. The rule of the Czars gave way in 1917 to the even more despotic rule of Marxism. The Kaiser gave way to Hitler. Even Cromwell could not retain the power he won by force, without the continued, ruthless use of that same force. Were the leaders of the IRA to be shot by paramilitaries, equally violent men would step into the shoes – there can be no doubt about that.

The sixth commandment, then, condemns also the use of violence for political ends. *No murder!* Words spoken by the mouth of God, and written by his very finger. Would to God that this commandment was faithfully taught in the pulpits and classrooms of our land today.

Action by the State

A difficult question arises. Is the Bible teaching pacifism and when a murderous dictator such as Hitler seizes power, is there no resistance at all that may be offered? In other words, is God's will that we refuse to resist and allow the evil tyrant to pursue every kind of wickedness unhindered?

When I was still at school in the 1950s and two years of 'National Service' in the armed forces was the prospect for every sixth form boy, the subject of *pacifism* was hotly debated by most seventeen and eighteen year olds. It was debated because the option was there for a young man to appeal against those two years of enforced service in the armed forces by pleading he was a *conscientious objector*, meaning that in all conscience he could have nothing to do in any way with an organisation that was licensed to kill, as the forces are in times of war. But pacifism is hard to justify on the basis of the sixth commandment. (By pacifism I mean the

pacifism is hard to justify on the basis of the sixth commandment

view that violence must always and without exception be met with with non-violence).

The words, *No murder*, as I have tried to show already in this chapter, mean, *No violent (revenge) killing*. We have seen that revenge is to be understood as personal, unilateral action. What Scripture teaches is that we are not to take the law into our own hands. *Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord* (Rom.12:19). Someone immediately asks, 'How does God repay?' The answer is by using the State to mete out just retribution. That is why in Romans 13 Paul immediately goes on to deal with the role of the State in this matter.

The defence of the realm

The principle laid down in Romans 13 is that it is the duty of the State to defend its citizens against violence, whether from within by criminal elements, or from without by some foreign power trying to take over by military force. Paul says that the State is *God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrong doer* (v.4b). The context makes clear that he is writing about the State resisting violence by using what today many would call 'violence'.

The difference between the State acting and the individual acting must be that while the individual will be motivated by the passion for revenge, the State will be motivated by the desire for justice. The two are not the same. The motivation for revenge is emotional, accompanied by deep passions. The motivation for justice should be calm, unemotional, objective and manifestly fair. That is not to suggest that the father whose daughter was stabbed to death and the parents whose two-year old was wickedly killed are not also motivated by the desire for justice. It is however to recognise that the individuals' desire for justice to be meted out may well also be mingled by feelings of revenge, and

that such feelings may not be trusted to be objective and impartial.

So whenever and wherever there is violence against its citizens, the State, according to biblical teaching, should protect them. We should not have to protect ourselves. Whenever citizens do have to protect themselves because the State is not doing it, then society – or at least sections of it – is breaking down, anarchy is creeping in, and law and order are also beginning to break down.

This is the sense in which we must understand the sixth commandment, *No murder! No revenge killing!* – because the State is there fulfilling its responsibility towards peace-loving citizens and protecting them. Paul argues in Romans 13 that this is why we pay our taxes. The State must have the resources to fulfil this as its prime duty to guard us from men and women of violence. The sixth commandment is assuming the defence of the realm to be in place and the State is performing its God-ordained duty.

A harvest of violence

We are all aware that capital punishment was abolished by Act of Parliament some forty years ago. What we tend to forget is that the pressure came from humanists. We can understand the view of the humanist. He does not believe in life after death, therefore he feels compelled to argue that the life of the most twisted, perverted killer should be preserved. Not wanting to appear intellectually unrespectable, many leading churchmen have supported the humanist view.

With each passing year, however, more pressing and obvious becomes

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the evidence that murder and violence increase in direct proportion to the lighter sentences meted out on the criminal by the courts. In other words, the more kindly and humane the sentences imposed on the violent offender, the more violence and murder there is.

When I was a boy in the 1940s and 50s, there were about five or six murders each year in Scotland. There are now hundreds of murders each year here, though such killings do not catch the headlines in the way sectarian killings in Northern Ireland have tended to do. But nearly one hundred stab-bings outside public houses in one year in Glasgow alone make violent murders so common that they are no longer news. Only the most horrendous killings catch the headlines. Murder has now become as common in the towns and cities of our land as burglary was forty years ago. Yet before capital punishment was abolished, only five or six murders in Scotland occurred in any year.

I want to question very seriously the views of the powerful humanist lobby which has been followed by our Parliament. Is it not morally wrong, invariably preserving the lives of self-confessed, violent murderers. The great majority of the population certainly would think so.

The case for capital punishment

We read in Genesis 9 of the covenant God made with Noah after the Flood. God was to protect the world from massive natural disasters which could destroy life on this planet. And part of the covenant with Noah had this provision: *Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man.*

As far as I myself can determine, that covenant condition has never been revoked in the New Testament. For some years, I wondered whether the death of Christ had some cosmic efficacy under what theologians call

'general grace' – that is, divine grace offered to all humanity irrespective of faith in Christ – which might justify the abolition of this principle. But after years of reflection it seems to me that Romans 13 confirms that the provision of Genesis 9 still holds firm.

Sincere and godly churchmen have used many arguments against capital punishment. But their arguments have either been emotionally or politically

all we have seen as a result of so-called compassionate laws has been a steady, relentless and truly terrifying increase in violence of every kind. Instead of our country becoming more compassionate, it has become more dangerous, more bloody, more cruel, more violent

based. They argue, for example, that no one has the right to deprive another of his life, or that many a murderer has come to faith in Christ and become a changed man. Or they argue that if the death penalty was to be restored, our nation would be classed along with governments which are tyrannies.

Of course, the churchmen who have fallen in with the humanists' view of the State urge that they want to see a more compassionate society. I am sure we all want that – only an anarchist would not want it! But all we have seen as a result of so-called compassionate laws has been a steady, relentless and truly terrifying increase in violence of every kind. Instead of our country becoming more compassionate, it has become more dangerous, more bloody, more cruel, more violent.

The Christian scriptures' answer is: *Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed.*

Here is a quotation from a recent issue of a weekly newspaper which serves a respectable, middle-class locality: 'Sex, violence and death, that's the package on offer at our town's cinema these days, and our hundreds of avid

cinema fans can't get enough of it.' The truth is that many feed their minds on the very violence we claim to deplore.

A caring people

What is to be our practical, daily response to the sixth commandment? We are to be a caring people! We are to be deeply concerned about violence on the screens. We are therefore to refuse to be entertained by violence, which arguably is one of the main influences that motivates the murderers who stalk our streets. We are to care by being courteous roadusers, driving with consideration for others, because the motor car in irresponsible hands can be a violent killer. If we are employers we are to care by taking thought for the safety, health and well-being of our employees. We are to care by showing the love of Christ in every way we can, every day of our lives.

Yes, there are those who urge that some murderers have been changed and have even made their peace with God which would have been impossible had capital punishment been administered. To such an argument we must answer that because we believe in life after death, we are to care that more people are not murdered before they have the chance to make their peace with God. The sixth commandment's concern is primarily for the majority rather than for those who have robbed innocent people of the precious gift of life. In perfect harmony with the divine law which led to our Lord's substitutionary death on Calvary, this commandment is motivated by the principle that the soul who sins shall die. It is through the atoning death of Christ that every kind of sinner, including murderers, may find forgiveness, peace with God and hope for a bright future in the life which awaits beyond death.

[Chapter 7 of a book on the Ten Commandments, *And Then There were Nine*, with questions for group Bible study, published by and available from Rutherford House, pp.191, £5.00 plus p&p]

Why Grief Support Groups?

Bill Webster

In two previous articles Bill Webster outlined the societal perspectives in which loss occurs, and offered an understanding of grief and the process of mourning. Here he describes a rationale and a model of grief support ministry.

Loss is inevitable. When someone finds himself unavoidably confronted with loss, and struggling to come to terms with grief, it can be one of the most difficult experiences of life. Yet the social perspectives that help determine how grief and loss is perceived in our culture often means that loss is minimized and grief unvalidated. Thus many grieving people find themselves feeling abandoned at the very time they need help the most.

People, in a death-denying society, need information about grieving. Edu-

cation as to what *is* normal and how grief affects us can free people up to do their grief work. Sometimes education *is* the best medicine. People need to know that the grief journey has a beginning and an end, yet may require guidance to work through that complex process, for they may not know what they need to help themselves.

Where can people turn for help? One important source is in a community grief-support programme. While there is undoubtedly a place for individual counselling and grief therapy, grief is not a disease, and should not be treated as such. While some complicated reactions merit therapeutic intervention, my years of experience in this work have shown me that, in the vast majority of cases a structured group format combining education and interaction is in many cases, the most effective method of grief support.

So, why support groups?

Let me suggest some of my own reasons:

1. A support group is a place where people can share emotions and pain, and receive emotional, physical and spiritual support in a safe, non-threatening environment.
2. A support group provides 'a place to mourn' especially when the person feels isolated, as so often happens in a culture that expects us to 'get over it', and when interaction with friends and family may be inadequate.
3. A support group gives the participant a sense of belonging – they are not alone – they are not the only ones feeling this way. Often in a group, deep and lasting friendships are made and some groups may even organize social activities and continue to support one through the long process.
4. Attendance at a grief support group helps the person face the reality of loss – they wouldn't be there if someone had not died.

People, in a death-denying society, need information about grieving. Education as to what is normal and how grief affects us can free people up to do their grief work

5. A support group helps the participant to know that grief is normal. The programme should provide information as to what grief is and how it *may* affect us, as well as giving opportunity to work through feelings adjustments and challenges.
6. A support group gives people *permission to grieve*: to understand that it is OK to have these feelings and think these thoughts. The group provides an environment where they will be accepted as wounded people, allowing them to explore their grief responses in a way that enables them to become compassionate with themselves.
7. A support group can be especially helpful when the situation is one that no-one wants to mention or think about, e.g. where the loss is not recognized, the griever is not recognized, or

in a situation that is socially unacceptable or stigmatized: a death from suicide; a death from AIDS; the death of a child (which society finds particularly difficult); the death of an unborn or newborn baby (which society tends to minimize).)

8. A support group can provide the exchange of practical assistance, concrete advice (where requested), guidance and encouragement between members
9. A grieving person often gains hope from meeting others who have been through the experience, have survived, and are moving on. Often bringing in a few people who have 'been there' and have dealt with their issues to tell their story can be a powerful influence on the group.
10. A support group is a place where people can learn to trust again after their loss, and even risk again in friendship and concern for one another.
11. In a support group people tend to help and encourage each other. While gaining help for myself, the opportunity to be a help to someone else can give me a sense of self worth and purpose.
12. A support group can provide ongoing support, ever changing in focus as the person begins to set new goals and directions for their life.

Developing a Model of Grief Support

Here is an important statement:

If we understand the *why*, the *how* will take care of itself.

Many times people rush headlong into a program without developing a rationale for that initiative. What follows is foundational to a strong effective programme, and will help you avoid some problems later on. Developing any meaningful program involves *learning to take it one step at a time*.

What's your Vision? What do you want to do?

It is important to ask 'What do we want to do' before we decide 'How are

we going to do it'. There are many different models of grief support programmes. Each community must decide which model is right for them, based on felt needs and available resources. Perhaps you might begin with a needs assessment. What does the community *need* in terms of grief support. Write down on paper your 'mission statement'. Doing this will help to add clarity and specifics to a general vision which can often be hazy.

What are your Resources? Who will be involved in leadership?

Your needs assessment will also be useful in providing information about good people in your community who could be involved in the leadership of this programme, either by active participation or support. Admittedly it is always a challenge to motivate people to get involved. The following principles may be useful to you in implementing this:

1. Communicate your vision clearly to those you hope to work with.
2. Develop a team; don't set up a committee. Committees rarely get anything done but a team works together towards the accomplishment of common goal or vision.
3. Involve people who share your passion to help the bereaved. Talents and abilities are secondary to that. You will find people have different gifts and abilities, but what will hold you all together is the common vision.
4. Spell out the cost. Many times we are reluctant to tell people the tough parts of what they are being asked to do. We think people will be more likely to accept it seems *easy*. But people are sick of 'easy'; they want a challenge. Dare to let your team members count the cost: the time that will be required, the labours ahead, a true picture of what will be involved. The people who say 'yes' when they have the whole story will be the best team members you could hope for.
5. Take time to dream together. Come together to envision the possibilities. Let people express their ideas and suggestions however far out or left field. You can always prioritize later.

6. Give everyone 'ownership'. By involving everyone in the process, it's no longer 'your baby'. It belongs to every person on the team. Make sure every person has a role to play, and that they have the freedom to play that role without interference. That does not mean there is no accountability. It's

Grief ministry is, in my view, an important and essential part of pastoral work not only to the faithful, but even more as a most significant and effective outreach to the community

just an encouragement to let people have the responsibility.

So when people have invested their creative ideas and been given the power to make plans and decisions and the freedom to carry those through, they feel motivated to do all they can to see the project succeed. Because it's *their* project.

Who are we trying to reach? Getting to know your constituency

Obviously you are trying to reach the bereaved and provide support for those in grief. But who? The recently bereaved? The widowed? Parents after the loss of a child? Children after the loss of a parent or sibling? Suicide survivors? And do we want to offer support to people right away, or 3–6 months down the road?

Most facilitators agree that it is better that a group not be homogeneous, i.e. do not segregate the bereaved into groups for specific loss. *Loss* is the common factor that brings people together, whether it is the loss of a spouse, parent, child, friend. While each loss is difficult and every loss is different, there are many common elements that bind people together. Indeed if you think about it, the experience of losing a spouse will be very different in every individual situation

because of a variety of factors. No two losses are the same and no two grief processes are identical. But, in all the common elements, we can learn from each other.

That said, however, there may be certain situations in which a group focused on a specific loss could be useful. These would include situations where there are unique circumstances that need to be specifically addressed, for example:

- a) a group for people who are grieving a loss after suicide.
- b) a group for people who are grieving the loss of a child.
- c) a group for people whose loved ones were the victims of violence.
- d) a group for those grieving a perinatal loss.

These situations often involve grief that can be complicated and should be facilitated by people who have a specific knowledge of the appropriate therapy.

How will we reach these people? You will probably have your own creative ideas as to how to let the grieving people know what is available, and word will get around that you are offering this ministry, and that is helpful.

What are we going to do? Effective programme planning

There are six different elements you need to consider when planning anything.

1. What am I going to do?
2. How am I going to do it?
3. When am I going to do it?
4. With whom am I going to do it?
5. What is it going to cost?
6. Who am I trying to reach?

Here is an important statement with regards to planning. *It doesn't have to happen all at once.* We can get carried away by the urgency of the need – and that's important. We need to brainstorm. Yet a brainstorm often leads to a flood of ideas, and in a flood you're more likely to sink than swim because it's just too overwhelming. So we need to establish priorities. Perhaps instead of a one year plan we can think of a five year plan. Sometimes the things

Dare to let your team members count the cost: the time that will be required, the labours ahead, a true picture of what will be involved

we want to accomplish tomorrow can be spread over a few months.

So try starting out small. It is better to do one thing well than many things with mediocrity, because people's reaction to your efforts will be defined by how effectively you meet their needs.

Establishing Priorities

Now that you've taken time to put together your plan and figured out some answers to your *Who, What, When, Where, Why, How* and *With Whom* questions, where do you go from here? That is often the surprisingly difficult question because it can be hard to know what to tackle first. To help you prioritize you must ask yourself what is the most important thing.

I have discovered a useful tool in helping myself organize and prioritize. It is simply called the A B C method. The idea is to list all the tasks that you want to accomplish. Then you go through them, marking A, against the things that must happen; B, against things that can happen or can wait; or C, against things that can wait. At the end of each day or each week, month or year whatever is appropriate, all the 'must happen' tasks should be complete, many of the 'can happen' things are done, and most of the 'can wait' things usually don't seem as important as before.

Now, what *must happen* in grief support in your community? Then what

can happen? By making such a list and ordering it properly you will probably accomplish what needs to be done to reach your goal. It is probably an inappropriate analogy, but I like to think of this as the 'rifle approach' rather than the 'shot-gun approach'. The rifle fires one bullet straight at a specific target. The shot-gun sprays multiple pellets all over the place. You can decide which approach suits your vision best. It is important however that we have a real sense of where we are aiming. As someone once put it "blessed are they that aim at nothing, for they shall hit it every time".

My Own Practice

Over the years, I have developed the following format for my support programmes.

While this format is constantly being improved, it may provide an outline from which you can develop your own format.

1. 'Let's Talk': (Unstructured)
 - This is a group designed for people in the early days after a loss
 - *Let's Talk* is a monthly meeting.
 - Numbers are always small
 - The format is unstructured. I often share some of my own story, and invite people to share what has happened. This helps continue what I feel is the healthy process of talking and retelling the story that took place in visitation around the time of the death.

The people who say "yes" when they have the whole story will be the best team members you could hope for

Try starting out small. It is better to do one thing well than many things with mediocrity, because people's reaction to your efforts will be defined by how effectively you meet their needs

• We usually give participants a copy of my little booklet *Now What*, which is designed specifically for the newly bereaved.

2. Grief Support Seminars: (Structured)

• This support group brings people who have experienced a loss together.
• It is a six or eight week process, combining education and group support
• Usually these seminars are offered to people who have experienced loss a few months previously. Some groups I have heard of set a strict *Wait three months* policy. But I do not presume to know when a person is *ready* to do their grief work, because everyone is unique. If a person expresses a desire and need to come, they are welcomed. If it is too early, and people find it is too much, they may excuse themselves, and we follow up to make sure they know they can return for a later group. Sometimes people will return to go through the process again, and we encourage this, because they will relate to other issues the second time around, and because, hopefully, they will bring some maturity to the group

3. Follow Up Programmes:
Usually these meetings are unstructured, but sometimes structured around a specific topic. It is an ongoing process for people who have been through the support series. Usually these meetings are held once a month, on the same day each month, and at the same time, and this avoids confusion.

In early December, a 'Coping with Christmas' seminar, often combining a memorial service in which people can participate in some act of memorial like lighting candles, can be meaningful at one of the most difficult times of the year for grieving people. Memorial

services can also be held at Easter, or on other occasions. Often such a ritual allows closure. Grief support should not last for ever, and it is good to program a way for people to leave the group when they feel ready, while leaving the door open for those who may not be ready. When a person is ready to leave is not a matter of time, it is an emotional readiness that we are wise to allow the person to assess for themselves. But you may suggest that if a person has a 'grief attack' in the future, they are welcome to come back and 'reconnect'.

The Place of the Church in Grief Support

In the years I have been involved in grief support I have seen many community agencies become interested in offering grief support. Many funeral homes, hospitals and human resource agencies now provide such support for their clients and reach out into the community as part of their service.

While acknowledging the efforts of secular agencies, as a person of faith I believe the Church should seek to be in the forefront of this area of ministry. When someone dies, many turn to clergy to conduct the funeral, and my conviction is that a meaningful funeral service can be the first step in grief support. Yet in some theological circles there is a subtle suggestion that to feel sorrow or to struggle with the emotional aspects of grief is evidence of a lack or loss of faith. Grief can even be equated with unspirituality if not unbelief.

After a significant loss many good people of faith struggle with the appar-

ent conflict between this attitude and their own painful experience. I believe there is a need to develop a sound theology of grief ministry that embraces all aspects of scriptural teaching on the topic. The hope and assurance of eternal life and that our loved ones are in the presence of God does not negate the fact that the grieving person struggles with the emotional and spiritual aspects of their loss, and how life, here and now at least, must adjust to the absence of one cared about. This is part of being human.

Grief ministry is, in my view, an important and essential part of pastoral work not only to the faithful, but even more as a most significant and effective outreach to the community. A grief support programme is *koinonia* at its finest. When bereaved people learn they can find acceptance, support and direction through one of life's most challenging situations, they will return to discover what you can offer them as a church. A church is never greater than when it reaches out to those who are wounded with comfort and healing.

In his next article, Dr Bill Webster will offer practical suggestions on group dynamics and leadership skills for grief support programmes. All this material is original research material by Dr Webster, and is extracted from his latest publication *The Guide to Good Grief Groups*. For a full list of resources, check his website at <<http://www.griefjourney.com/>>).

Church Discipline of Lapsed Members

The following account, for reasons which will be evident when it is read, is published anonymously.

According to John Calvin the marks of the true Church are, 'the ministry of the Word, and administration of the sacraments instituted by Christ'. He writes, 'inasmuch as it was of importance to us to recognize it [the Church], the Lord has distinguished it by certain marks, and as it were symbols. ... Hence the form of the Church appears and stands forth conspicuous to our view. Whenever we see the Word of God sincerely preached and heard, wherever we see the sacraments administered according to the institution of Christ, there we cannot have any doubt that the Church of God has some existence...'.¹ Calvin regarded discipline among members as highly necessary in the Church,² although he never made discipline a mark of the true Church. Possibly this was because of the peculiar position in which the Church was placed in Geneva.

John Knox went further, adding discipline as a third mark whereby the

true Church can be discerned. 'The notes of the true Kirk of God we believe, confess, and avow to be, first, the true preaching of the word of God... Secondly, the right administration of the sacraments of Christ Jesus... Lastly, Ecclesiastical discipline uprightly ministered, as God's Word prescribed'.³

The purpose of discipline is made clear in *The Liturgy of John Knox* (1564): 'There are three causes chiefly which move the Church of God to the executing of Discipline. First, that men of evil conversation be not numbered amongst God's children to their Father's reproach... The second respect is, that the good be not infected with companioning with the evil... The third cause is, that a man thus corrected or excommunicated, might be ashamed of his fault, and so through repentance come to amendment...'. Following Knox, the Church of Scotland has always regarded discipline as a necessary mark of the true Church.

The difficulty of discipline

I myself have always regarded discipline in the Church as important and necessary. No Church can grow spiritually without discipline. If the world would know Christ, it must encounter him through the life and witness of the Church. The Church should be, as it were, the visible face of Christ on earth. All too easily the Church can by its life conceal Christ from others.

I have not however found it easy to administer discipline. Ministers and elders have no authority in themselves to administer discipline. They cannot of themselves judge others and must not attempt to lord it over the flock.⁴ Judgement and authority belong to God and lie in the Word of God alone. Discipline in the Church can only rightly be administered through the preaching of the Word and the agency of the Holy Spirit. It must be exercised in love with a deep concern that those disciplined might by the grace of

God be brought back to Christ in repentance and faith.

When we ourselves are weak and sinful, how then can this be done? How can discipline be administered in faithfulness to the Word of God and in obedience to God's will? How can it be exercised so that it is evident the Church is not acting arbitrarily, in a human sort of way, but is seeking in love to act in obedience to the Word of God? How can those being disciplined be persuaded to repent and return to Christ because they have heard not the Church but God speaking to them? The whole issue concerns commitment – or lack of commitment – to Christ, not to the Church (although we often make it seem as if it was only to the Church). I confess I have never found this easy.

However I do not want to approach the subject from an historical perspective, far less consider it in a purely academic or theological way. Rather I will try to share some ways in which I have tried to exercise discipline, in the light of my personal theological reflection and prayer. This will necessitate some background of situations within which I ministered. What difficulties might one encounter in seeking to administer discipline?

The responsibility of the elders

First, the administering of discipline in the Church of Scotland (of which I am an ordained minister) belongs to the elders: it is the Kirk Session – not the minister acting alone – which is called to exercise discipline. So how can the Kirk Session administer godly discipline if the elders themselves are not committed to Christ, and are not spiritual persons who understand Scripture? How can discipline be administered in love if the elders neither exercise love among themselves, nor manifest a genuine love in Christ for lapsed members, nor have a practical concern for their return to faith in Christ? How can discipline be exercised if elders themselves are not disciplined either in their own attendance at worship or in their own Christian lives?

My conviction is that unless both minister and elders are themselves right with God, understand his Word, have Christ's love within them and have a real concern for the Christian faith of the whole congregation, then discipline cannot rightly be administered. It is too easy for discipline to be carried out harshly. Far too often 'pruning of the membership roll' has been hastily carried out during a vacancy under the chairmanship of an interim-moderator who does not know the congregation. Even worse, the roll has been pruned

extension created two miles away within the parish. In theory, there was one Kirk Session and one Congregational Board⁵, although in practice two different congregations. The church extension building had been built five years before I became their second minister.

Fisticuffs

Unknown to me at the time, there had been a severe break-down in the relationship between my predecessor and members of the Kirk Session as well as

How can discipline be administered in love if the elders neither exercise love among themselves, nor manifest a genuine love in Christ for lapsed members, nor have a practical concern for their return to faith in Christ?

under pressure to present a better set of statistical returns on Sunday attendance and financial giving. Too often names have been removed without adequate knowledge of the circumstances of the supposedly lapsed member, often with disastrous consequences – the person so disciplined is hurt and resolves never to come back to church!

Elders and office-bearers

From New Testament times it is clear that the Christian commitment, faith, example, witness and leadership of office-bearers is crucial for the building up of congregations. Many people can either be drawn to Christ or 'put off' by the lives and example of a minister or office-bearer. Biblical discipline must begin here, although this is where it can be hardest to exercise it!

My first parish

My first parish was a union between a small, very old church and a church

a break-down in relationships between the office-bearers. My first Board meeting took place about ten days after my induction. As I entered the halls, I heard shouting and found the office-bearers standing in a circle with two elders, the Session Clerk and the Church Officer in the centre, about to come to blows! I arrived just in time to seize both elders by the shoulder and hold them apart! There followed an embarrassed silence whereon the Session Clerk demanded a Kirk Session meeting following the meeting of the Board. In my college training I had never been taught muscular Christianity! What was I to do?

The Board meeting which took place was probably the shortest I have had. Members had no desire to speak. Elders remained after the Board closed. Constituting the Kirk Session, I read a familiar passage from 1 John⁶ where we are told to love one another! I then asked the Session Clerk, who had requested the meeting, to say what was on his mind. In the next twenty minutes he 'blew his top'! I became aware

of severe tensions: discussions within the Kirk Session were not regarded as confidential, criticisms behind peoples' backs were wide-spread, some office-bearers would not speak to each other and when walking in town would cross the street to avoid speaking to others.

After twenty minutes I interrupted the Session Clerk as I thought that he had said enough. I thanked him for saying what was on his mind. I then called on the Church Officer (who was at logger-heads with the Session Clerk) to speak. Mercifully he simply stood and apologised. I thanked him and called on behalf of the Kirk Session for the Session Clerk to receive his apology. I then addressed the Session.

Weeping

I told the Kirk Session we had sinned and grieved the Lord by our quarrelling, and that such quarrelling and back-biting would no longer be tolerated. If it occurred it would be dealt with most severely. (I had no idea what I would do!). I then prayed and asked the Lord to forgive us as a Kirk Session and unite us in love. The two who had been at the heart of the quarrelling asked if I would meet with them after the meeting. Both elders broke down and wept with the shame of being openly caught out. I spoke of the need to forgive one another and others in the congregation if we would ourselves receive the forgiveness of God. I had further prayer with them both and said 'Good-night'! In the days that followed, I visited both in their homes, talking about the meaning of Christian forgiveness, the call to love and unity, and praying with them.

Reconciliation

At the time the incident appalled and stressed me. It also taught me to pray in a deeper way for the congregation. In the following months, working through the Sermon on the Mount, I preached often about forgiveness. I informed the Session that I would not ordain as elders, or admit as an office-bearer, anyone who was not in Christ at peace with his neighbour or would not be welcomed into any home in the

parish. (I had been asked by the Kirk Session to ordain as elders members of the Congregational Board who were not on speaking terms with each other.) The elders thus came to realize that reconciliation in Christ was what was demanded by God. After eighteen months certain office-bearers came to tell me they had forgiven one another and wished to be reconciled. In time I ordained them and to my joy two men who previously at been at loggerheads asked to share an elder's district and so travel in the same car. My experiences in those early weeks of my ministry taught me the need to affirm openly year by year that before elders were nominated or new Board members appointed at the AGM it should be understood only those who loved the Lord, were faithful in wor-

before elders are nominated or new Board members appointed at the AGM, it should be understood only those who love the Lord, are faithful in worship and are at peace with others should be considered for office

ship and were at peace with others should be considered for office.

Kirk Session Bible Study

To try and encourage spiritual growth in my elders, in all three different parishes I devoted half an hour of every Kirk Session meeting to Bible Study or some spiritual discussion. In the early days I used the first half hour of the meeting. Soon I used the last half hour for Bible Study, finding that more helpful, so I arranged we would begin each meeting sharp on 7.30pm and conclude our business no later than 9.00pm; from 9pm to 9.30pm we would have our Bible Study and discussion; the benediction would be at 9.30pm. Any item of business not concluded by 9.00pm would be taken up at the next Kirk Session meeting!

In all three Kirk Sessions, elders came to enjoy those spiritual discussions best. They helped to unite members of the Kirk Session and introduced a helpful spirit.

In one Kirk Session, we followed a biblical course on the eldership lasting two years. In another, we went through (among other things) a study of the Pastoral Epistles. When the Word of God became central to Kirk Session business the issue of discipline ceased to be a problem.

My second parish

In my first parish I soon had one hundred per cent attendance at worship of elders and office-bearers, and after some three years, a real bond of fellow-

They had accepted office with no understanding and now found themselves in a difficult position with a minister who was committed to achieving high spiritual standards

ship and love. After nearly fourteen years, I was heart broken to leave that parish. I moved being called to another Church Extension charge in a city suburb. Reluctantly, I felt this to be God's call. Again, I went as the second minister appointed to a charge which had been started nine years previously. I was warned by the National Church Extension Committee to expect difficulties. The difficulties proved greater than could have been imagined.

Bankruptcy

At my first Board Meeting I discovered the church was bankrupt. There were unpaid bills a year old and no money to pay them. A letter was read from the Electricity Board to the effect that, if a year old account was not paid forthwith, the electricity would be

turned off, leaving the church premises with no heat or light! The Congregational Board had been unaware of its financial situation for the treasurer had never been required to give a financial report!

Attendance at worship was extremely small. Congregational morale was low. During the vacancy seven office-bearers had flouted civil law in their daily living. There had been severe quarrels and misdemeanours within the congregation. The work of the Kirk Session and the Congregational Board was not adequately organised. Office bearers did not know what was expected of them. Elders knew nothing of their responsibility for pastoral care and had never been expected to visit.

Little idea of commitment

A large proportion of both elders and Board Members attended church only once a quarter when they were on duty! My Session Clerk attended church monthly, mornings only! Some attended twice a year and one elder once a year! They were all very pleasant but had little idea of Christian commitment or the purpose of the Church. As I tried to teach them what was required of Church office-bearers I felt extremely sorry for them. They had accepted office with no understanding and now found themselves in a difficult position with a minister who was committed to achieving high spiritual standards.

I did not seek the removal of any elder, not even of the one who attended church once a year and who never attended Kirk Session meetings. Nor did I want any to resign. Far less did I want any to withdraw from the Session feeling hurt or unjustly treated. I did, however, seek to set before them what was required of each of us to serve in Christ's Church.

Mass resignations

At my first Kirk Session meeting, I asked each elder to act as a spiritual shepherd to the homes in his district. I did not know at that point that no elder had a district! I encouraged them

to pray for one family each night so that if they had twenty one homes they might pray for the whole district every three weeks. Thereupon one elder resigned, becoming the first of many. When visiting him he agreed that what I asked of the elders was right only he could not pray for others as he never prayed! Later the Session Clerk informed me that although he was married he was tangled with another married woman, a church member. Later others resigned, one having been accused of financial embezzlement in a matter outside of the church. One, after resigning and becoming released from the pressure of the eldership, became very regular and faithful in worship and personally friendly to myself.

After about eighteen months, a crisis came one evening at a Kirk Session meeting. I said to them, 'Next Sunday ten new communicants will be admitted to the Lord's Table by profession of faith. What do you think these new members will think when we, who put to them vows about attendance at worship, do not ourselves keep these vows?' There was an embarrassed silence. I continued, 'What do you think they will think of a Church which puts these vows to them and yet elects elders who do not keep these vows?' After more embarrassed silence I said, 'I can give a record of attendance at worship of every office-bearer since I became your minister eighteen months ago, because I keep a weekly record!'. My Session Clerk, who attended church once a month burst out, 'Is this constitutional?' I replied it was thoroughly in keeping with the Word of God for every shepherd to know his sheep. They were each ordained as shepherds. How could they know what their sheep were doing in the matter of church attendance if they did not come to church to find out? That week five elders resigned.

Around that time, feeling the urgent need to visit the whole parish of some nine thousand people, I invited a neighbouring parish to assist in a parish visitation. The neighbouring Kirk Session gladly agreed. Several of my

Our concern for the lapsed must always be a concern for commitment to Christ

elders, including my Session Clerk, proposed we should not visit on the grounds they felt visitation was no part of an elder's duty. I pressed the need to visit and a motion to that effect was carried by a narrow majority. That week a further five elders resigned.

Constrained to pray

I was deeply sadden to lose elders. I invited each to reconsider his resignation. None did. Altogether some 15 elders resigned. Resignations for whatever purpose are a strain and I felt the strain. Following this and after celebrating Holy Communion one evening an elder who was faithful said that he would like on behalf of his fellow elders to express thanks to me as their minister. He said they felt I was the right minister in that parish and that God had called me. Before I could feel somewhat uplifted however, he went on to say, 'But you are a hard task-master!' I felt humbled, yet encouraged.

I felt the need to pray more than I had ever done previously and found myself praying for the congregation and parish for about two hours each morning before breakfast. In the end we had some eighteen committed elders, including two very fine and godly Readers.⁷ They became a spiritual Kirk Session. Five elders wept when I intimated that I was leaving in answer to a call from another church. I was sorry to leave them.

Lapsed members

Only after we had spiritually progressed, and (in my second parish) had added elders of a different quality, did we proceed to the consideration of lapsed members within the congregation. As already stated, I have never found the issue easy. Our concern for the lapsed must always be a concern for commitment to Christ. How can

elders revise the roll in such a way that each person's circumstances are carefully, lovingly considered? Discipline must not cause any undue sense of hurt. The prayer must be that lapsed members might be persuaded to repent and return not simply to the church, but to living faith in Christ.

In my second church I inherited a role of some 800 communicant members. Of these some 200 had never to our knowledge attended church once since the church had been opened nine years before or since their names had been added to our roll. They were really the off-prunings of other city churches. Another 200 hundred people to our knowledge had only attended church once, which was when the new church building had been first opened five years earlier.

The Supplementary Roll⁸

My faithful office-bearers found it discouraging and demoralizing to visit these homes. For the most part they were not welcomed. Something required to be done for the spiritual welfare of the Kirk Session as well as for the lapsed!

The process of discipline varies from congregation to congregation. In our case, after a carefully written letter had been delivered, each home was visited three or four times by minister and elder when we endeavoured to express our earnest desire they come back to church. At the end of the year, having met with no response from many of them, we removed approximately 400 people, transferring their names to the Supplementary Roll, thus acknowledging our ongoing pastoral responsibility. As a result the elders and worshipping community were much heartened. Congregational life and membership became more meaningful. To my knowledge only one couple

were offended by the transfer of their names to the Supplementary Roll. These lapsed members continued to be visited by an elder. I am happy to relate that not a few of those removed from the Communion Roll were ultimately restored to full membership and became faithful worshippers. Often the change of heart came after an opening occurred for further pastoral contact through some family crisis or bereavement.

My third parish

Some years before I entered my third parish during the ministry of my predecessor there had been a rather harsh pruning of the roll where people were struck off and told that they were excommunicated! Although during that ministry a later pruning had been carried out in a gentler way, there was a deep hurt within the parish and those so 'disciplined' informed me they would never again come to church! Some never did, although I continued to exhort them when visiting. Others, particularly after a bereavement, did return to church. Therefore, despite there still being 'dead wood' among the 780 members I inherited, any revision of the role was carefully and sensitively done on a very small scale.

In each of my parishes, we were the only church in the parish. In my first and third parishes, the population was under two and a half thousand. As such I endeavoured to visit regularly all the sick in the parish, members and non-members together with those in special need. This meant each week I was visiting non-members more than members, and regularly came into contact with the lapsed. Because in a smaller parish everyone tends more easily to know everyone else, although persuaded of the rightness of discipline, I did not ask the Kirk Session to administer it to the same extent as in my second parish.

Conclusion

I offer a summary what I have endeavoured to say about discipline of lapsed members.

1. Discipline within the membership of the congregation is necessary so that, in the words of the Reformers, the Body of Christ may have a 'visible face'. The Church, not the world, is the Body of Christ. Godly discipline is necessary to distinguish the Church from the world.
2. Discipline both encourages and helps the office-bearers in their visitation of members.
3. Discipline is necessary for the members themselves. When rightly administered it helps them to face up to the need for continued commitment to Christ.
4. Discipline needs to be administered only after it has been administered within the Kirk Session and elders have acknowledged the need of consistent Christian commitment in their own lives.
5. Discipline of the membership of the congregation should always be administered with caution and from the right motives.
6. Discipline should not be administered hastily, but only after ample warning has been given to the lapsed, preferably after several visits to the home, the nature of Christian commitment explained and time given for the lapsed to alter their ways.
7. Discipline must distinguish between commitment to Christ within the fellowship of the Church, and nominal commitment to the Church as an institution.
8. Discipline must always be administered out of love for the lapsed and with the deep concern that they will be brought to commitment to Christ.
9. Discipline involves, on the part of office bearers, humility, prayer for God's guidance, an understanding of God's Word, and the knowledge that all authority is of God. As a Kirk Session we can only rule through the Word and the Holy Spirit.

Endnotes

- 1 Calvin, *Institutes* 1V.1.8,9.
- 2 *Idem* IV.12.
- 3 *Works of John Knox*, Vol.3, p.110; see also Vol.4 p.172.
- 4 1 Peter 5:3a.
- 5 Members of the Kirk Session are ordained elders, but members of the Congregational Board who are not elders are known as 'office-bearers'. *Ed.*
- 6 1 John 4:7-21
- 7 A 'Reader' in the Church of Scotland is a non-ordained person trained and set

apart to conduct worship and preach the Word. *Ed.*

- 8 In the Church of Scotland, when a member's name is removed from the Communion Roll and placed on the Supplementary Roll, restoration is necessary before readmission to the Communion Roll. *Ed.*



Ann Allen meets Tony Sargent

Enter Tony Sargent's spacious office in the impressive building which is the International Christian College (ICC) and on the walls are some clues to the man and what drives him.

There are two portraits; one of C.H. Spurgeon, the other of Dr Martin Lloyd Jones. There are two maps; one of India, the other vast and comprehensive of the world.

The Revd Dr Tony Sargent, Principal of International Christian College for the past three years, has had a ministry which spreads far beyond the walls of the college, But where and how did it all begin?

Ann: What would you identify as the most formative influences which gave shape to your ministry.

Tony: I am thankful for my antecedents and upbringing in Sheffield in a very large and successful Elim congregation. I went to train for ministry from an Arminian Pentecostal back-

ground but in London was influenced by three outstanding evangelicals of that time in the sixties, Principal Kevin of London Bible College, Rev John Stott and perhaps most significantly the ministry of Rev Dr Martin Lloyd Jones. Such exposure along with my own personal searching of the scriptures reshaped my theology and confirmed me a Calvinist doctrinally. My rejection of adherence to premillennialism meant I could not subscribe to Elim's doctrinal statement so my plans for ministry had to take a different direction. While seeking that direction I taught in North London, married Rowena, and was taken under the wing of Tom McBeth Paterson from Glasgow of Tent Hall Fame. He encouraged me in ministry and I became his assistant, preaching in numerous independent evangelical churches. I learned an enormous amount from him, not least from his anecdotes about Glasgow, so that thirty

years later arriving here the place seemed strangely familiar!

Ann: Life before ICC was in Worthing where you spent 29 years as the Pastor of Worthing Tabernacle. Did you envisage such a long and eventful pastorate as a young man of 26?

Tony: The "Tab" in Worthing had been vacant for two years when I went as a "pulpit supply preacher". Within six months I was called and established as their pastor. They really had not researched my C.V. very thoroughly or they would have known that I had rarely conducted 3 consecutive services in one place and I had never conducted a funeral! Not the greatest preparation for taking up the leadership of one of the historic independent Churches on the South Coast founded by one of Spurgeon's men in the Independent Baptist tradition.

Ann: Despite that apparent lack of preparation your staying all those years indicates a long and happy partnership in the Gospel. Many pastors would long to achieve that. Apart from the grace of God how do you think that was achieved?

Tony: The call from the congregation came out of the blue really, and was not terribly attractive to Rowena and I, but it began a honeymoon that never finished. I honestly cannot recall one unpleasant church meeting in 29 years. Such were the bonds that I wept every Sunday for 6 months after leaving Worthing.

Perhaps some of the ease in relationships comes through approaches to leadership and people management. I have a pretty open, easy approach to management. I sincerely believe that if people have confidence in you as a person and there is mutual respect then antagonism can be prevented. I engaged with people prior to important meetings seeking to defuse issues and to build rapport. Prayer was a major plank undergirding all we did together. I inherited a responsive but traditional congregation used to authoritarian control. My first session meetings were silent affairs as people waited to 'be told'. It was almost like the Pope being in session so the Cardinals just Nod! That changed and together we grew a marvellous working partnership.

Ann: In almost 30 years the congregation must have developed in a variety of ways.

Tony: Significantly prayer became the bedrock of membership. All were welcome to associate with us, but membership meant a commitment to the active corporate prayer life of the congregation and there were numerous opportunities each month to live that out. We weathered the hysteria of Charismatic fever which swept the South some years ago, by meeting with the influential leaders, recognising our shared goals, being honest about our differences and building bridges of mutual respect and we developed a

vibrant commitment to mission in the developing world.

Ann: That brings us to India. What took you to India all those years ago?

Tony: George Verwer of Operation Mobilisation was in Worthing and asked to preach. I was very wary of setting as I thought 'a loud mouthed American fanatic' before my quite staid congregation who might resent being set upon by an American terrier. My fears, which kept me in prayer for most of the preceding night, were misfounded. He was quite brilliant in setting before us in a blunt address the need to be globally minded. He won the hearts of the congregation to such an extent that afterwards my most conservative elder suggested we give £1,000 to his organisation...a lot of money in those days.

George Verwer had just been ejected from India and forbidden re-entry. He asked if I would go in his place. It had never crossed my mind to go to the Isle of Wight never mind India! The congregation released me to do so and the rest is history!

Ann: I made my first visit to India this Spring. It would be fair to say that experiencing India radically affects people. It changed you didn't it?

Tony: India changed me and profoundly impacted on my congregation. They saw Asia through my eyes. The congregation established businesses to fund Third World Programmes. These partnerships drew people into the fellowship of the Church and expanded our local ministry. A team gathered alongside me and released me to follow up work in India and also Africa and gave me the flexibility and support needed to carry on these far flung ministries simultaneously. When I was home I gave myself exclusively to the work of the Tabernacle. In return they enabled me to develop the work

abroad and supported it in prayer and practical giving.

I have responsibility for the development of O.M.'s work in India and am involved in the Directing of Africa Inland Mission. We have Bible Training colleges to support overseas, the one in Bombay, four times as large as ICC.

Ann: We could schedule a whole interview to your overseas involvement alone, but a background in Calvinism, preaching, teaching and a networking overseas could be the ideal blueprint for becoming Principal of a new Scottish Bible College and yet that was the last thing you had in mind wasn't it?

Tony: Yes. The call to come here was unsought. I was very happy and fulfilled where I was and although I had successfully completed a PhD and published research on Dr Martin Lloyd Jones I didn't regard myself primarily as an Academic. My father used to say that the B.D. I gained stood for Born Daft! However if the call was from the Lord I was willing to come, and so it has happened.

Ann: It could not have been an easy transition. Two colleges, Glasgow Bible College and Northumbria merging, two campus disappearing into one, which did not then materialise, an inadequate budget and a huge change in personnel. Stress multiplied I imagine for you and Rowena?

Tony: If I ever entertained a doubt about coming it was when I realised we would have the worst case scenario of launching a 'new' merged college from an old inadequate campus. However at the launching of the New and the winding up of the Old I felt the challenge from the Lord was to leave familiar comfort zones and take the risks necessary... I ask the Lord to give me a capacity equal to the opportunity. Risks are not recklessness when we trust in a sovereign God. Three years on those

risks are justified and tested in coming to this building. The Lord has smiled on us and here we are in this wonderful facility, able to house not only our students but many other organisations as well, debt free and, under God, flourishing. If I were to hand pick my present staff I could not have a finer team.

Ann: What would you like to see the college contributing to christian life in Scotland?

Tony: 60% of our 170 students come from Scotland and we are impressed by their calibre. In this age of internet and distance learning there is enormous potential for Christian education and I would want the college to exploit these possibilities. We have 25 different nationalities represented in our student body and our overseas links give us an incredible international network which we can share with others. I would long for us to be a centre where Theology and Theophany are twin indivisible goals. Most of all I would like the college to be 'owned' by the church in Scotland and to establish a confidence within the Scottish constituency. For the college to be recognised, prayed for, supported by and to be contributing to the church in Scotland is a primary goal. In financial terms we need between £100,000 and £200,000 each year to break even. We receive no government grants. We receive contributions from many sources but it would mean far more to receive tangible support from the church in Scotland.

Ann: As an unbiased objective transplant from the south of England how would you assess the spiritual life of Scotland today?

Tony: Most Sundays find me in a new and different pulpit so I have a fair overview of church life across the country. There is huge diversity of worship where there is real encounter with the reality of God. Variety can add to quality and there is certainly that throughout the land. Sadly I see

great polarisation. There does not seem to be much common meeting ground or fraternisation between different theological camps and so many people are unaware of what is going on in different areas and other constituencies. But I am hopeful for the work of Christ. I pray on for revival in the 21st century and despite all that is developing in these turbulent days I steadfastly believe that the earth will be filled with the Glory of God as the waters cover the seas.

Tony Sargent has an enormous capacity for work. He has great vision and clearly imparts that vision to others, a mark of outstanding leadership. He is excitingly positive and I suspect that is so because of his unshakeable trust in a sovereign God. He told me he felt he was in the best job in Scotland and obviously means it. ICC can only flourish in such dedicated and visionary hands. I left his company energised and realistically hopeful for the cause of the gospel here and in the wider world.

Book reviews

Genesis—Interpretation Series

Walter Brueggemann

John Knox Press, Atlanta, 1982, 384pp.
ISBN 0 8042 3101 X

No-one with an interest in biblical theology should fail either to be stimulated by or to benefit from this richly theological commentary from the prolific, ever-stimulating and often-provocative pen of Walter Brueggemann.

In keeping with the *Interpretation* series to which it belongs, this commentary is written for those who 'teach, preach, and study the Bible in the community of faith'. As such, it seeks to be 'both faithful to the text and useful to the church' and therefore should find a ready audience amongst the readership of this journal.

The commentary is divided into four main sections, following obvious divisions in the text. These sections are given the following titles which reflect Brueggemann's homiletical as well as scholarly concerns: 'The Sovereign Call of God' (which met with mixed response in the period of 'pre-history', Gen. 1-11); 'The Embraced Call of God' (in the life of Abraham, Gen. 12-25); 'The Conflicted Call of God' (in the experience of Jacob, Gen. 26-36); and finally, 'The Hidden Call of God' (in the often perplexing providence experienced by Joseph, Gen. 37-50).

In each of these sections, and in keeping with his premise that the 'relation between the two Testaments is a mutual one in which each may aid in the interpretation of the other', Brueggemann's exposition is guided, in measure, by NT texts, respectively, Eph. 1:9-10; Heb. 11:8-19; 1 Cor. 1:27-29; and Rom. 8:28-30 – perhaps most appropriately and successfully in the second and fourth of these.

While occasionally I found myself wondering if I had been seduced by the poetry of Brueggemann's language more than by its theological substance, there is no doubt that on countless occasions I benefited from his refresh-

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ing insights which led me to doxology. There are not many commentaries about which I could say that.

On the other hand, while there is much to savour here, readers of this journal are not likely to swallow all that Brueggemann sets before them. For example, his claim that humanity made in the image of God is 'the only part of creation which discloses to us something about the reality of God', is not consistent with the teaching of, say, Rom 1:20. Furthermore, his assertion that 'there is no hint that the serpent is the embodiment of principle [*sic*] of evil' is contradicted strongly, for example, by Gordon Wenham in his Word Biblical Commentary on Genesis chapter 3. Many of us will also have great difficulty with Brueggemann's assessment of Genesis 3 as an 'an exceedingly marginal text'.

Nevertheless, this is one of the most theologically rich commentaries I have read in recent years. It has drawn me afresh to the text of Genesis and has opened my mind and heart to new avenues of interpretation and application. It has even provided me with 'inspiration' for a couple of sermons on Joseph's dream. In recommending it highly, as a preacher I yearn for more commentaries of this ilk.

Hector Morrison, *HTC, Dingwall*

Evangelical Truth

John Stott

IVP, Leicester, 1999. 158pp. £7.99
ISBN 0 85111 596 9

John Stott is widely regarded as a key player in the remarkable resurgence of evangelicalism in recent times. This book is his personal plea for unity prompted by the tendency of evangelicals to fragment and by a personal desire to leave behind a spiritual legacy on the essence of evangelical truth.

Stott begins by acknowledging the genuine overlap between the catholic, liberal and evangelical strands of the Christian Church. Not all evangelical

essentials, he contends, are evangelical distinctives. Equally what unites us as evangelicals is much greater than what divides us.

In a global context the evangelical faith is not a recent innovation but owes its origins to apostolic New Testament Christianity. Nor is it in any way a deviation from orthodoxy or a synonym for fundamentalism. On the contrary, there are three essentials, says Stott, which define an authentic evangelical witness in a staunchly trinitarian character. These are the work of God the Father in revelation, the work of God the Son in redemption, and the work of God the Holy Spirit in renewal. 'The gospel comes from God, centres on Christ and His cross and is confirmed by His Spirit'.

In conclusion, Stott argues that every one of us faces a multi-faceted challenge to walk our talk, and to behave as we believe in accordance with God's will. Integrity in faith needs to be married with sensitivity to those different from ourselves. Richard Baxter's favourite quotation should be our watchword here 'unity in essentials, liberty in non-essentials, charity in all things'.

Our lives must demonstrate, says Stott, stability, humility and endurance, faithfulness to God and fruitfulness in His service.

This book is a splendid, concise distillation of Stott's thinking on the defining essence of Christianity. Controversial issues such as holiness, revival and the gifts of the Spirit are not side-stepped. All in all a worthy legacy deserving a place in every theological library.

David JB Anderson,
Evangelical Alliance, Scotland

George Whitefield's Works On CD-ROM

Quinta Press, Oswestry,
Website <http://www.quintapress.com>
Price: £60 / \$100

In 1967 the present reviewer first encountered *Whitefield's Works* in 6 volumes at Wesley College near Bristol, and became captivated by them. Since then he knows of only three sets

in personal libraries. There are, of course, more in public libraries, though often in poor condition.

Now these volumes, in facsimile, are available on CD-ROM through the industry and computer skills of Dr Digby L. James. A new era has arrived of the easy availability of Whitefield source material, previously difficult to access. This will be invaluable to enthusiasts and researchers. *Whitefield's Works* consist of 1465 letters (from 1734 to 1770), 57 sermons, and various tracts. To these are added the *Journals* which were never published with the *Works*.

Both letters and sermons are supplemented by smaller collections discovered since the *Works* were published. This saves the researcher much time and effort. The incompleteness of *Whitefield's Works* have always defeated comprehensiveness, but now Dr James has taken us much nearer completeness. He may yet produce a definitive collection of all extant documents.

For readers who may want an introductory impression of Whitefield's life and character the CD-ROM includes *Anecdotes of Whitefield* by J.B. Wakeley (1879), with a short biographical sketch, then a collection of cameos of Whitefield. There are also 124 photographs (using the latest photographic technology) of scenes and artifacts associated with Whitefield from his origins in Gloucester to his burial place in Newburyport, Mass. USA.

This unique collection of material within a single CD-ROM brings source material of the 18th century revival within easy reach of computer users. For British and American readers it is basic evangelical history; a treasure trove from which to enrich the 21st century. Dr James has opened a very large field of this treasure,

The CD-ROM is fully indexed and quickly and easily used. It is very positive example of the technology put to excellent use.

Peter Brumby, *Newcastle-on-Tyne*

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1 Corinthians – New International Biblical Commentary

Marion Soards

Paternoster Press, Carlisle, 1999, 390pp, £8.99

ISBN 0 85364 661 9

Today's Church lacks a coherent message, is torn asunder by strife, and is complacent in regarding our present cultural milieu as the satisfactory product of a previous generation. We are in many ways like the church at Corinth, and the society we live in is as morally corrupt as the city itself. So the correspondence of the Apostle Paul with the church at Corinth is of immense significance to us. The first letter was written as a warning about many issues of contemporary relevance — ethical, moral, charismatic, unity and separatism, pluralism amongst others.

Marion Soards' commentary on the First Letter is a helpful treatment of the book by a scholar who nonetheless exegetes the book from a pastoral perspective and for pastors, as is the whole series.

I often wonder in reading any commentary on First Corinthians whether it can be as helpful and stimulating as Conzelmann's in the *Hermenia* series. I was struck by a number of things about this work. In Soards' work there is a refreshing brevity of style and economy of words helpful for the minister conscious of time for all duties especially preparation for sermons.

Soards helpfully gives a briefing in scholarly opinion on the text in question and also textual notes. He judiciously weighs up the plethora of opinions with a deft '...two sensible suggestions merit attention ...' found for example in his comment on 11:10. Additional Notes to each paragraph are a great help in informing or reminding the reader of the issues raised. For the study and its hidden 'spadework' these are so useful.

For the minister in the pulpit, Soards clearly demonstrates the mind of Paul and opens up the letter in its

Corinthian context. I find his treatment successful because his outline of the book is accurate.

With regard to the textual and exegetical difficulties in this letter Soards is fair, and with regard to his own comments he is helpful with the exception perhaps of paragraph 50, *The First and Last Adam*. If only more space had been given to this important subject. Notwithstanding this mere splinter in his eye, Soards produced a commentary of good value, fertile with suggestive sermon material to impact upon and minister to the minister.

Richard G Buckley, Glasgow

A Thousand Miles of Miracles

AE Glover

OMF/Christian Focus, Tain, 2000, 326pp. £7.99

ISBN 1 857 92 511 4

A Chinese proverb says, 'A journey of a thousand miles begins with one step'. In this book we begin with one miracle, Christians working in China against the odds who find themselves overwhelmed by miracles as God works in their lives. God had called them, was with them, and He protected them in their work in a land of ancestor and spirit worship. If anyone ever wondered if God could move mountains, then this is the book to read. If anyone ever wondered if God could take an ordinary man and his family and use them powerfully, then this is the book to read.

When the Boxer Rebellion began A E Glover and his family faced danger at every turn and every day as they fled the anger of a superstitious people and the cruelty of the Boxer Rebellion in 1900. Beijing today conjures up visions of the mighty being thwarted by a man as a student stood in front of a tank. In 1900 God used ordinary people to thwart the mighty as they strove to destroy His servants. Miracle after miracle ensued as the Boxers incited hatred of the 'Foreigners' and put to death many hundreds.

This story of the bravery and faith of a small band wholly trusting in God, as they make their thousand-mile journey

seeking safety, will touch the heart of any who read it. Not only for the bravery of the missionaries, but for the way in which God provides for them, and in their darkest hour shines the light of His love, which not only showed them the way, it also blinded their would-be murderers.

A thoroughly faith-stirring account told in the matter of fact style of one who never doubts God's love and provision, even if death were to come for that would be God's will. For His purpose is to be met with the knowledge of the race run and the faith having been kept, thus anticipating the promised crown of glory.

Read this book and have the depth of your faith challenged!

Dennis S Rose, Kirkton, Dumfriesshire

Authentic Christianity Volume 1 Acts 1-3

D Martyn Lloyd-Jones

Banner Of Truth, Edinburgh, 1999, 328pp. £15.95

ISBN 0 85151 776 5

The three hundred pages of this book interact with only the first three chapters of the book of Acts. Would this daunt you? It need not! This is a most readable and gripping book. Each of the short twenty-two chapters is actually a sermon. First preached in 1965 they are still fresh and very relevant today.

For Lloyd-Jones, Acts 1-3 is the blueprint for contemporary authentic Christianity! That is, 'what the Christian church is, what Christianity is, and what it really means to be a Christian...' Christianity is not a theory, nor simply an experience, not a code of conduct. The Gospel concerns '... life and living... a life and death matter...' Lloyd-Jones often preaches in negatives as well as positives.

Authentic Christianity is born as the Holy Spirit operates on the individual bringing radical new and transformed life — a new life which results in true Christian unity — doctrine, fellowship, praise. The purpose of the church is found in its witness to the person, work and teaching of Jesus Christ.

If you want an exposition of Acts 1–3 you will be disappointed. By admission, he will only 'pick out certain themes'. The balance of the book reflects this. Only one sermon speaks from the first chapter, the bulk arising from chapter two. This imbalance frustrates, as the first and third chapters in Acts seem to offer more than is included.

However, to pew and pulpit the sermons still engage, enrich, thrill and challenge. They provoke also. He states that the time preachers spend in their study 'polishing (his) phrases, thinking of clever illustrations... is so repugnant to the New Testament Gospel...' This is quite ironic as his sermons are a very helpful mine of illustrations, quotes and apposite personal experiences.

This preacher has a habit of catching your eye, 'have you ever put these questions to yourself', he asks. The book does prick. I am forced to ask not only if I see authentic Christianity today, but more importantly, have I experienced it?

This book would make a most worthwhile purchase giving helpful biblical corrective to a straying church and world.

Scott Kirkland, Brightons

John – Abingdon NT Series

D Moody Smith Jr,
Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1999.
428 pp.
ISBN 0 687 05812 0

The *Abingdon* series is primarily for theological students while also intended to be useful to pastors. Smith is clear and concise; his compression of the issues of authorship, for example, into less than four pages, is masterly. He posits four settings possibly reflecting four stages of composition of the Gospel: Jesus' historical ministry, a period of conflict with the synagogue, a stage when Christian theological issues arose leading to the farewell discourses and some other sections, and a stage of further Christian reflection during which those sections were developed and others written. His division of the body of John into 'The revelation of the Glory before the world' (2:1–

12:50) and 'The revelation of the Glory before the Community' (13:1–20:31) has much to offer.

The English text on which the commentary is based is the NRSV, which is more common in the USA than in Britain. Rather than giving a verse by verse commentary each passage is subjected to three stages of analysis: literary, exegetical and theological and ethical. Good for students but it does mean that you read about each passage at least three times; often more, sometimes wondering which analytical stage has now been reached. Greek words are transliterated; *hypoosō* (p.240) should read *hypoō*.

The main good news is the amount of scholarship and balanced judgement compressed into every paragraph. Also there are frequent recommendations for further reading, as 'O'Day 1995, 704–5, has an excellent chart of the Passion and Resurrection narratives in the canonical Gospels' (p. 233).

I have some dislikes. The sheer level of compression produces an analysis that sometimes alternates unhappily between the obscure and the obvious; and it gives too few opportunities to explain important terms adequately. The index is less than exhaustive, which for a reference work is irritating. It is not a 'sell your shirt for it' book like (say) Oswalt on Isaiah; but prepare a sermon using it and there is scarcely a paragraph that is not suggestive.

G Peter White, Glasgow

Romans – Read Mark Learn Series

William Taylor
Harper Collins, London. 2000. 249pp,
£7.99
ISBN 0 551 03252 9

The staff of St Helen's Church has given us another valuable tool for the study of Romans. In the same style as the other studies in this series (Mark and John), this study will prove worthy for small groups who wrestle with the text of Romans.

Read, Mark, Learn: Romans is prepared for use by leaders of small groups. A wealth of material has been assembled to enable the leader to direct the discussion so that the text is en-

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gaged in its proper context. Each study includes numerous questions to stimulate thoughtful study of the text. More questions draw the students to application. The questions are intended to be distributed ahead so the student is directed when he reads, marks and learns in preparation for the class.

Each study includes a 'context' section to keep the study grounded in the overall argument of the Apostle. A section of 'Old Testament Background' assures that the concepts introduced in the text are understood with the meaning for First Century Jewish believers. The 'Text Notes' follow a careful development of the outline of the text. This format forces the student to stay close to Paul's argument, thereby avoiding the tangents which lead to unwarranted interpretation. Thus, the studies which deal with the Law, the Nation of Israel, and the Christian life have careful and consistent interpretation.

This reviewer appreciates the early emphasis(chapters 1–3) on the God-centredness of the Gospel. The biblical Gospel is practical for living, not merely 'getting men saved'(man-centered). Study 5 gives a needed emphasis on propitiation and justice. However, the text notes are so God-centered that one could almost miss the truth that Jesus Christ is the propitiation for sinner's justification. Mentioning 'union with Christ'(p. 65), the study describes the two realms of Adam and Christ but fails to develop precisely what this union involves. The discussion of faith(p. 61) does not help to answer the question of how this union takes place.

The mind of this reviewer has been trained in the patterns of Systematic Theology. Admittedly, such a pattern is controversial for the Biblical Theologian. However, it seems to me, that *Read, Mark, Learn: Romans* could be strengthened by the inclusion of a section in each study called 'Summary of Doctrine'. To do so would clarify and

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correct some few fuzzy statements such as, 'Since saving faith comes through accepting the message about Christ...' (p. 169). In all fairness, this perceived weakness might be understood, if not mitigated, by remembering that the writers have stayed very close to the text itself.

James A Hunt, Mooresville,
North Carolina

Christians and Bioethics

Edited by Fraser Watts
SPCK, London, 2000. 84pp. £7.99
ISBN 0 281 05194 1

This is a delightful wee book. There are only 81 pages of text and these are eminently readable. The chapters are self-contained, as befits its origins as a series of sermons at a Cambridge city-centre church. It covers a number of very sensitive issues in a thoughtful and knowledgeable way. After an introductory chapter by Fraser Watts on approaches to bioethics, the book goes on to cover cloning (by John Polkinghorne), genetic engineering of food (by Derek Burke), transplantation (by Michael Rees), reproductive medicine (by Tim Appleton) and euthanasia and assisted suicide (by Michael Langford). Many of the authors are directly involved in the area they are covering, for example, Derek Burke was for a number of years the chairman of the body charged with advising the government on novel foods. This in-depth knowledge shows, sometimes graphically, as when Michael Rees describes his thoughts when removing a still beating heart from a brain dead person.

The book also addresses some wider questions. The chapter on transplantation for example, considers what makes us human. Is it our DNA? Our organs? Or something else? Fraser Watts makes a plea for more informed, ethically sensitive discussion among society at large about what is and what is not right in the possible applications of these technologies. Michael Rees

points out that in our current post-modern society where truth is relative and personal preference has replaced truth, there are no rights and wrongs and what is right becomes what society will tolerate. However, he suggests that the Christian message provides a basis on which we can make moral judgements.

This is not an anti-science book, but it is not uncritical either. For example, Derek Burke calls for scientists to be less assertive, less arrogant, and to be more aware of the dehumanising effect of the innate reductionism that is the basis of molecular biology.

This book would be a useful resource for any congregation wishing to engage with these issues. Its strength is its shortness and clarity and if you want to look at these issues in more depth, there is a list of further reading material at the end of each chapter.

Ann Bruce, Edinburgh

Preaching like Paul

James W. Thompson
Westminster John Knox Press, Kentucky, 2001. 177pp. £12.99
ISBN 0 664 22294 3

Is a sermon a rational exercise to get the message across by explanation, illustration, and application? Or in the ethos of a post-modern era with its rejection of authority and absolute truth, should a sermon help listeners to 'experience' a passage, preferably a narrative?

In this book Thompson, N.T. Professor at Abilene Christian University, reminds us that like Paul we live in a pagan society, pre-Christian in his case, post-Christian in ours. He argues that Paul's letters involve both *kerygma* and *didache*, providing a model for pastoral preaching as they reflect on circumstances in the life of the local congregations: 'Because of the challenges that face the preacher in our own culture – short attention spans, biblical illiteracy, a pluralism that is hostile to all truth claims – we are likely to be wary of the Pauline model which does not conform to the community's expectations ...the Corinthian correspondence is a reminder of the

price of not engaging in sustained theological discourse.'

Thompson affirms that Paul did not alter the message to make it relevant, but presented it in a relevant way. That presentation is narrative and therefore an appropriate model for a post-modern age looking for the big narrative. A book which helps preachers think in these terms is useful. An interesting appendix gives examples of the process of sermons preparation, thus countering the tendency to separate theory and practice!

Omissions from the otherwise comprehensive reference index are Hunter's *Paul and his Predecessors* which was somewhat 'lost' by reaching publication in 1940, and *A Man in Christ* by James S Stewart, who, combining scholarship and preaching, underlined the Pauline relationship between the evidence for truth and the experience of that truth in the person of Jesus.

Sandy Gunn, Aberfeldy

Portraits in Courage

Dave and Jan Dravecky, with Steve Halliday
Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1998. 198 pp.
\$12.99 US
ISBN 0 3102 1664 8

Dave Dravecky was an all-star pitcher for the San Francisco Giants prior to his losing an arm to cancer. He subsequently set up Outreach of Hope, an organisation dedicated to getting alongside people struggling with cancer and amputation. This book reflects his work, telling of battles fought with the painful adversities of life, sometimes won, sometimes lost, but faced with a steadfastness of faith and extreme courage.

The book is divided into three sections, reflecting three facets of health suggested by Jurgen Moltman – the strength to live, the strength to suffer and the strength to die. In each section the authors recount the stories of everyday people caught up in seemingly insurmountable trials, yet who, in Christ, found the strength to live, and die, courageously. An example of the chapter headings are: 'Circumstances

Don't Last Forever (But God Does)'; 'When Death Doesn't Take a Holiday' and 'A Grand Slam Over Heaven's Center Field Wall'.

It is suggested in the introduction that the book should be read piece-meal; wise advice, since the recounting of adversity after adversity could be overwhelming, and a certain sadness in the stories could lead to an emotional overload. The book is very American, very popularly written, yet challenging in its own way. It leaves the reader asking, "Could I face such pain and trials with that sort of courage?" Yet it also reminds the reader over and over again that it is Christ who strengthens and gives the courage.

I would not recommend this book as an addition to your library, but borrow it from a friend for holiday reading!

Norma F.W. Downie, Kilmarnock

His Victorious Indwelling: Daily Devotions for a Deeper Christian Life

Ed. Nick Harrison
Zondervan 1998, 496pp.
ISBN 0 310 21849 7

The 365 daily devotions for a deeper Christian life each begin with a bible verse (NIV) which is then expounded by a well-known writer. This is often followed by a shorter quote by a different author. Each day's reading would take a mere 5-15 minutes to read and reflect on, a suitable length to begin a busy day or to end a long one.

The value of each devotion in terms of gaining understanding in meaning and insight in spiritual depth will vary according to the author. Watchman Nee and Charles Spurgeon's writings, for example, are well known, tested and tried, and never fail to provide sustenance. However, many of the 186 authors are described as gifted members of the 19th Century Brethren movement. 'Gifted' they may have been in their time and place, but in twenty-first century Britain the tenor of what they say is less than helpful to the point of turning the reader off so that he ends up gaining nothing. C.H. MacKintosh (July 13th) on Luke

22:42, for example writes 'There is immense danger, in the present day, of following in the wake of others, of doing certain things because others do them, or doing things as others do them.'

In a culture where individualism and selfishness are endemic we need a far more visionary encouragement to walk the daily Christian path. I could not recommend this book.

Ruth Campbell-Jack, Dumfries

A Bend in the Road

David Jeremiah
Word Publishing, 2004 280pp
\$18.99 US
ISBN 0 8499 1521 X

This book opens with a pastor's faith being sorely tested when he receives the devastating news that he has cancer. Will he really be able to put into practice what he believed and preached about God for years?

He points out that the natural question in these situations is to ask why, when in fact the 'better' question is *what*.

He considers suffering simply as a 'disruptive moment' that happens in life. In such moments, he argues from Hebrews 12:5-11, there is a purpose! Really three purposes:

1. They are often Divine Appointments.
2. Progress without pain is usually not possible.
3. The promise of God is the provision of grace.

In some of the darkest hours of his chemotherapy he turned to the Psalms and found them to be medicine to the soul. The Psalmist's devotion to God in the midst of crisis challenged David Jeremiah to concentrate on God and not so much on himself. In doing this he found it made such a difference in coping with all the indwelling fears within his heart. A personal crisis can be an emergency, if we dwell on ourselves, instead of an opportunity, by fixing our hearts on God.

In chapters three to ten he gives case histories of other heart rendering stories of various people who also came

Book Reviews

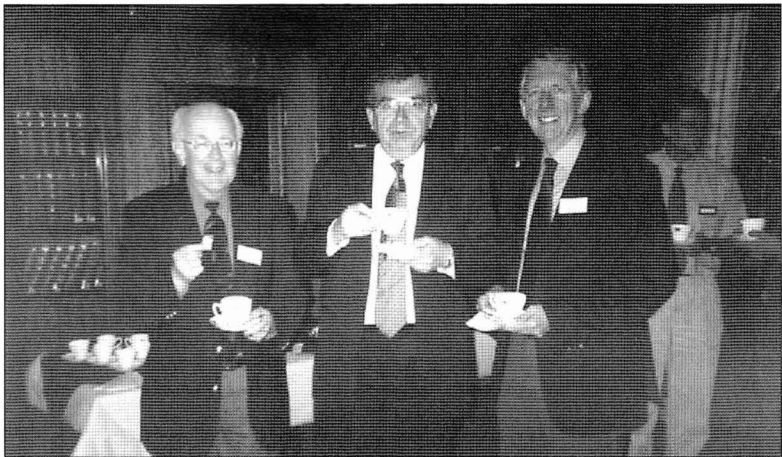
to 'a bend in the road'. These stories are very moving, revealing how God is indeed a God who is all sufficient, especially in the midst of devastating situations.

This is *not* a book that answers the various questions about 'healing', but it will be a real source of help to those going through some valley of despair! It is a practical pastoral book which will help those who are severely tested in their faith in the midst of some bend in the road of life.

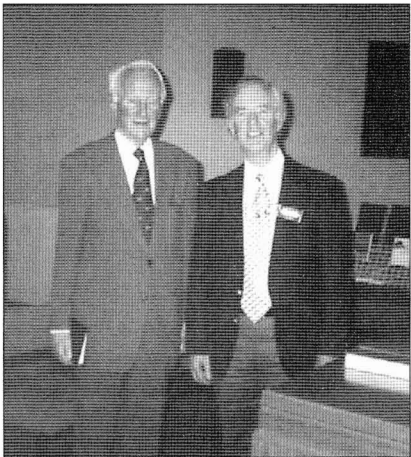
*William A McCully, Letterkenny
Co. Donegal*

Conferences 2001

2nd Scottish Ministry Assembly, June



From left: Bruce Milne, Sinclair Ferguson and David Jackman, speakers



The Warden with John Stott

9th Edinburgh Dogmatics Conference, August



Some of the Theology Students who attended



Prof Bruce McCormick, USA, one of the speakers



Church and Ministry, September

Some of the members who attended